

Note: While the questions raised in this paper are ostensibly addressed to senior leaders in the Anglican communion and certain African bishops, and reflect what I feel are relevant issues of unity not dealt with by the Windsor report, the same questions may be asked of ourselves and our own church leaders in our own culture where we have failed to create a spiritual climate of respect for gays and lesbians, for women and the feminine, and for human sexuality itself.

Over many years I have had deep respect for the Anglican Communion and its evolving partnerships and have valued its capacity to address the critical humanitarian and justice questions of our time.

I therefore find it perplexing that certain African bishops threaten to break up the Anglican Communion over a Canadian diocese's decision to bless two men or two women committed to living together in love, dignity and peace, while in their area of the world the number of women suffering from overwork, crippling poverty, sexual humiliation, brutal rape and death from HIV/AIDS has reached catastrophic proportions.

Many of us in Canada trusting in the liberating love of Christ have worked to uphold the human rights and dignity of our brothers and sisters who have found themselves born into this life sexually different. Since we are being chastised for this, I have to ask to what extent have certain African bishops addressed grave matters of sexuality in their cultures, where in too many cases men believe they have entitlement to use and abuse women, and women believe they are born to suffer, to be silent and to submit. Since it is the case that African bishops select certain scriptural passages to judge the spiritual commitment of a gay bishop and the blessing of gay and lesbian couples, I have to wonder what scriptural references they apply to address the following situations which as far as I'm concerned may be understood as pathologies:

Stephen Lewis, envoy for HIV/AIDS to Africa from the United Nations who this year addressed our General Synod, reported that the majority of African women afflicted with HIV/AIDS are faithful wives. They contract HIV/AIDS from husbands who believe it is their sexual right to have another woman or two or three 'in town' on the side.

From church and other reliable news sources, I learn that in Southern Africa, a girl of fourteen has a 50/50 chance of living to age 35. Young girls are targeted by older men because they believe they won't contract HIV/AIDS from a virgin. Baby girls in South Africa are being routinely raped.

In the Congo, a woman may be raped a hundred times over and have her vagina shredded with knives and sticks as part of an enemy's military strategy, yet the husband considers this brutality the wife's fault and will have nothing more to do with her.

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Young girls in Africa are still being brutally circumcised because it is believed a young girl will find no husband unless she is excised and sewn up tight so that her husband may have the pleasure of forcing his way through. If she cannot be used and abused in this way, she is not worth having. What are African bishops actively doing to save young

girls from being doomed to lives of pain and mortification? What selected scriptures are they applying to alleviate such hell?

When did the African bishops last address the Anglican Consultative Council with their concerns about these vital spiritual and sexual questions? If male and female are made in the image of God, what are they doing about the destruction of half of God's image in their midst?

Women in rural Africa often carrying alone the burden of child-rearing are still found doing most of the farming, all the domestic work. Despite educational programmes on gender issues over several years with the support of outside church partners, women are still found to be beasts of burden while their husbands in many situations may be found sitting around in the villages 'making decisions' and drinking beer. From reports I have from those who work in African development, men continue to believe it is demeaning to do what they believe is women's work. How are African bishops encouraging men to find spiritual identity and self-esteem in taking more responsibility for the well-being of their communities and families? What are the African bishops in leadership doing in the liberating love of Christ to free men and women of demeaning stigmas whether they be of scriptural or cultural origin?

In correspondence with a knowledgeable African friend, I know that atrocities against gays and lesbians are committed regularly in Africa, and yet I read in my church paper that African bishops deny there is any problem. To what extent are African bishops who insist on literalist applications of scripture challenged by senior leaders in other parts of the communion that such insistence may well deny the transforming presence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus decried literalism and passionately called for blessing on all relationships founded on healing, mutual understanding, justice, commitment, forgiveness and love.

One would think the Windsor report would encourage us as members of the Anglican Communion to examine, challenge and honestly share what we observe in our cultures to be failures in love, causes for shame and contradictions in faith. Instead what is offered is a convoluted, legalistic document which declares our life as Anglican Christians to be founded on scripture before all else. Whose interpretation of scripture? Is the work of the past two hundred years to liberate the scriptures from the literal being ignored? More seriously, is the Spirit of the scriptures being ignored, the Spirit, which by the same scriptures, we are told to value more? At the same time the other pillars of Anglicanism - Tradition, Reason (such as biological studies), and Spiritual Experience (that is, how we find ourselves experiencing the transforming power of Christ's love in the 21st century) - all appear in the report to be given short-shrift. Where are the results of Lambeth resolutions from 1978 and 1988 for studies on homosexuality that would take seriously the teaching of Scripture in the light of scientific and medical research? Where did these studies get lost in Lambeth 1998?

The report would ask the Communion to place unifying authority in the episcopate, rather than in the journeying of the people of God, the worldwide community of believers in all their diversity. In this respect, a fundamental element of unity, baptism, seems to be

glaringly missing. As baptised members of the church, are gay and lesbian Anglicans as their orientation emerges to be suddenly considered second-class members, forbidden to live in committed and loving relationships in the same way as heterosexuals, especially should they find themselves being called by the Holy Spirit to fulfill roles of deacons, priests, bishops? Where is the discussion about the church as a sign-community founded on the inclusiveness of baptism?

While I am glad to see mentioned in the report pastoral care for people who are homosexual, I see nothing offered to those who are homophobic. There is not a whisper of a prospect that people suffering from homophobia be encouraged to get over it, when we know in our own experience that thousands have, coming round to receive gay and lesbian singles and couples with love and respect.

I once experienced a great life-giving spirit in our Anglican Communion based on partnerships whose purpose was to alleviate human suffering through caring and a prophetic call to justice, that saw value in unity-in-diversity within a range of theological understandings. Now I see from the Windsor report an Anglican Communion in the grip of leaders given to a top-down, literalist, legalistic approach, who seek to promote a unity based on rigid hierarchies and conformity. Deeply spiritual people will not be ruled by a Council of Advice, but by what they know to be true about God's love and justice in their hearts.

Submitted by Janet Parker Vaughan, March 24, 2005