

**A Submission to the Working Party on Human Sexuality
A PLEA FOR INCLUSION AND WELCOME IN THE IRISH METHODIST
CHURCH**

‘I was a stranger and you welcomed me’

Old Testament/Hebrew Bible Perspectives

INTRODUCTION

- 1 We live in the age of the computer, mobile phone, the world-wide-web, the I-pod, a world described in terms of cyberspace. Our world has witnessed the decoding of human DNA. The stars of distant galaxies can now be examined with greater precision. The myriad mechanisms inside the human brain are now beginning to be unlocked.
- 2 However, of one universally natural phenomenon we know very little. That phenomenon is homosexuality. Kinsey scientifically documented it but proffered no explanation of its origins. It befuddled Freud. However the scientific consensus of the Wolfenden report in 1957 concluded that homosexuality was “compatible with full mental health” and main stream psychiatry no longer regards homosexuality as a deviation and mental disorder.
- 3 The Church from earliest times took a more negative stance. Sex was regarded by Augustine as an “unfortunate necessity” for procreation. He even went as far as saying that contact with female bodies was degrading for a man. Origen and Jerome considered all sexual pleasure to be evil. In the Middle Ages Thomas Aquinas viewed what he called bestiality, sodomy and masturbation as sins “against nature.” At the Third Lateran Council in 1179 homosexuals, money lenders, Jews and Muslims were condemned. Vast numbers of people were tortured and exterminated under the Inquisition for same gender relationships and in France such persons continued to be burned alive until the 18th century. In England the death

penalty for practising homosexuals was replaced by life imprisonment in 1861. By contrast in a study by The World Council of Churches in 1995 ceremonies for uniting two men have been found in liturgical manuscripts dating from the Middle Ages. Despite modern advances in understanding and legal safeguards emotions still arise sharply in churches over the issue of same sex relationships.

- 4 The tantalising questions still remain. Are people born gay? Is it genetic? Is it related to hormonal variations in the womb during pregnancy? Could it be affected by early childhood environment? Or is the function of some other unknown factor? All we know is that it is probably fixed about the age of three and this lack of precision is due to the complexity of the phenomenon itself and who knows whether sexual orientation isn't multi-determined by a number of genetic, environmental or hormonal factors?
- 5 Many of these complex issues are being addressed in the 21st century by a wide field of scholarship in an attempt to shed new light on them. Important studies by social scientists, historians, lawyers, political theorists, psychologists, neuroscientists, geneticists, and others as well as theologians and biblical scholars. Discussion in Christian Churches is now becoming more public and dialogue is being encouraged. The outcome is that there are sharp divisions in the whole field of biblical studies **about how we should interpret those texts which appear to refer specifically to the issues of same-gender relationships.**
- 6 Broadly speaking there is a seven fold spectrum in the churches with regard to same gender relationships; **PROHIBITION** – the view that does not approve of and argues for disallowing same-gender unions; **TOLERATION** – this viewpoint, while it does not approve of, yet it would not reject gay or lesbian people, seeking to change them to what they see as more natural life style, and seeking to impose a fidelity and chastity rule, tolerating homosexual orientation but rejecting its practice; **ACCOMMODATION** – advocates of this view concur with the “welcoming but non-affirming view” of the tolerationists but go further by arguing that Christians need to extend grace to those who are seeking to live lives of sexual integrity as many gay and lesbian couples form lifelong relationships

that are exclusive and faithful; **LEGITIMATION** – this view seeks to include gays and lesbians in the community, and wants to prevent them from being singled out and condemned unfairly; **CELEBRATION** – here same-gender unions are no longer scorned but affirmed; **LIBERATION** the perception with this approach is that attitudes to same gender issues are viewed against wider injustices which need resolution and finally **CONSECRATION** a view that argues for the full blessing of same-sex unions.

- 7 I might add that many Christians still do not go beyond the first four; prohibition, toleration, accommodation and legitimation and feel very uncomfortably about celebration, liberation and consecration. The non-affirming church approaches take as their basis four main points; a) the Bible, they believe, is clear about prohibiting same-gender sexual behaviour; b) the Church's theology of marriage limits sexual expression to that between a man and a woman; c) same gender relationships are against nature and d) centuries of Judaeo/Christian moral teaching condemn same gender sexuality. Can a step be taken to move towards a more welcoming and affirming position in church life and practice? Two things may be helpful in this painful, difficult and complex journey. The first is to engage in meaningful dialogue with same-sex couples and the other is to grapple in a more in depth way with biblical and theological study of the issues of sexual orientation.
- 8 Much of the opposition to gay and lesbian people in our society has been fed by arguments of a biblical and theological nature. I have been asked to speak today about OT/Hebrew Bible perspectives on these issues.
- 9 When addressing the OT/Hebrew Bible we are speaking about a very ancient text. The transmission of that text (largely in Hebrew) came into existence over a period of about 1000 years from approx. the 12th century BC to the 2nd century BC and the final canon was not agreed until the famous Council of Jamnia ca. 100 AD. Originally written in the older Hebrew or Phoenician script it was later transmitted in the more modern square script with no points or vowels (the consonantal text of the OT was the script of the time of Jesus). Vowel and other signs did not appear on the sacred text until about 600 AD – the work of scribes called Masoretes.

10 The main texts that have caused discussion and controversy on the issue of sexuality are Genesis 1:27-28; 2:18-25; Genesis 19 (Lot in Sodom); Judges 19:22-25 and Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13.

11 I will address **the texts in Leviticus** first as they are adjudged to be the most controversial. The book of Leviticus has been the starting point for evaluations of same gender sex acts in Judaism and Christianity. A vast interval separates the cultural milieu of Leviticus from us in the 21st century and this raises a key issue as to how we understand such texts with regard to the time they were written and the context in which they were applicable. Many of the injunctions of Leviticus appear to have no relevance to the 21st century, for example sowing fields with two kinds of seed, ban on charging interest, strict prohibition on the “abomination” of eating ostrich meat, a food adjudged to have health benefits today, dietary codes which exclude shrimp and pork, animal sacrifice and male circumcision. Uncleanness may result from contact with dead bodies or from childbirth, skin diseases and bodily discharges. Animals are divided into two groups, the clean and the unclean. However, the core values of Leviticus are of special relevance to our society today, namely, mercy to the poor, justice to those who are different and integrity in practical everyday living and a key command is “to love your neighbour as yourself”, an ideal put by Jesus at the heart of the Gospel message.

12 The two texts directed to the male leaders of Israel which have sparked off the most controversy about homosexuality are found in Leviticus chapters 18 and 20.

13 18:22 reads: ואת־זכר לא תשכב משכבי אשה תועבה הוא

The Hebrew literally reads: and with a male you shall not lie, lying with a woman (*mishkevei 'ishshah*) it is an abomination (*to'evah*). **The NRSV translates the text as follows: You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.**

14 20:13:

וְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁכַּב אֶת-זָכָר מִשְׁכְּבֵי אִשָּׁה תוֹעֵבָה עָשׂוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם מוֹת יוּמָתוּ דְמִיָּהֶם בָּם

This literally reads from the Hebrew as follows: if a man lies with a male, as with a woman (*mishkevei 'ishshah*) an abomination (*to 'evah*) both of them have committed, they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them. **The NRSV translates: If a man lies with a male, as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them.**

15 The phrase *mishkevei 'ishshah* means literally according to the Jewish scholar Baruch Levine, “after the manner of lying with a woman” by the introduction of the male member. However, it is important to note that male homosexuality was associated with the ancient Canaanites, highlighted by the two OT narratives about the men of Sodom in Genesis 19 and the fate of the concubine at Gibeah in Judges 19. **BOTH ACCOUNTS SET MALE HOMOSEXUALITY IN A SPECIFIC CONTEXT, THAT OF XENOPHOBIA (extreme fear of strangers, inducing attacks on them).**

16 Pagan priests (*kedeshim*) appear to have engaged in homosexual acts and the term (*mehir kelev*) (the pay of a dog) mentioned in Deuteronomy 23:17-18 refers to the wages of a male prostitute, who usually serviced men, not women in ancient societies – “None of the daughters of Israel shall be a temple prostitute; none of the sons of Israel shall be a temple prostitute. You shall not bring the fee of a prostitute or the wages of a male prostitute (*mehir kelev* – מְחִיר כֶּלֶב) into the house of the Lord your God in payment for any vow for both of these are abhorrent (Heb. abominations – *to 'evah* - תוֹעֵבָה) to the Lord your God.”

17 THE TERM (*to 'evah*) – ABOMINATION while used to refer to male homosexuality has much wider connotations in the OT as it occurs about 116 times and is used to condemn idolatry, defective sacrifice, magic, false weights and other sexual aberrations as well as all illicit cohabitations.

18 The term *mishkevei 'ishshah* – after the manner of lying with a woman is rendered by the LXX (Greek translation of the Hebrew OT) as *arsenos koiten* from the words for “male” and “bed”. It is interesting to note that Paul’s word for homosexuals in 1 Cor.6:9 is *arsenokoitai* and this

compound word not found in any extant (surviving) Greek text earlier than 1 Corinthians is probably derived from the LXX of Leviticus. In some biblical translations this Greek word – *arsenokoitai* is still translated “sodomites” [on the assumption that the prevailing sin at Sodom was homosexual rape] but this is now adjudged to be inaccurate and misleading. The NIV translates as follows: “Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers, nor male prostitutes, nor homosexual offenders, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.”

- 19 Leviticus 18 appears to forbid homosexuality as part of a long list of unacceptable sex acts and the extreme death penalty for same sex acts applies also to adultery, incest and bestiality.
- 20 The two passages from Leviticus clearly prohibit certain male homoerotic acts but this still begs the question – which ones? and why? Those who read the text literally and take it at face value applying it to the 21st century must apply other parts Leviticus to modern society. Other scholars address the context more specifically to the ancient society of that time and argue that the act in the two passages from Leviticus was one that a socially superior man usually imposed on a socially inferior man.
- 21 In ancient societies this was usually done to slaves and other subordinates as a form of sexual gratification. In ancient society it was a gross indignity for a male to be sexually penetrated by a man and this act was often perpetrated on prisoners of war, indicating dominance, exploitation and humiliation. In the book of Lamentations, a book which describes the psychological trauma and suffering after the Fall of Jerusalem there is an example of this in Chapter 5. Not only are women openly raped but men are forced to grind corn at the mills, normally the work of women. Scholars suggest not only was this a humiliating act but in order to try and protect the women the men were further subjected to sexual penetration by the Babylonian invaders.
- 22 It is interesting to note that there is no text in the Bible which issues any instructions about sexual expression between women. The silence about

what we today designate as lesbianism is quite telling. One explanation by Jacob Milgrom is that although lesbianism is attested in an old pre-Israelite Babylonian text, “there is a fundamental difference between the homosexual acts of men and women. In lesbianism there is no spilling of seed. Thus life is not symbolically lost, and therefore lesbianism is not prohibited in the Bible.” In a study by *the Uniting Church of Australia* it was the male act that was seen as an abomination as male semen was believed to contain life. Both the act between males and masturbation was seen as tantamount to murder. In a precarious situation in the wilderness semen as a source of life was adjudged to be too valuable to be wasted. However, Robert Gagnon, a conservative scholar in his 2001 study, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice; Texts and Hermeneutics*, argues that the Hebrew word translated as “abomination” usually signifies an “intrinsically evil” act. He sees the Levitical law as forbidding the homosexual act as absolute due to the fact that it merits the death sentence and further adds that strict laws are required because of the addictive nature of sexual pleasure. However many other commands in Leviticus are now ignored, for example wearing garments made of two fibres or the command not to have sexual relations with a menstruating woman is no longer adhered to. Also many conservative Christians today argue that homosexuals should be treated with loving compassion.

23 My own view is that the socio-historical environment in which these prohibitions were made must be taken seriously and is highly significant. It was males who exercised authority within an extended kinship order, many of whom were sexually polygamous and under the conventions of that time concubines and slaves would have been sexually available to the head of the family.

24 That is why Leviticus 18:6 is of significance; “none of you shall approach anyone near of kin to uncover nakedness,” literally in Hebrew “any flesh of one’s flesh” – כל־שאר בשרו. This referred not only to nakedness but also was a euphemism for sexual intercourse and exposing someone to sexual vulnerability.

- 25 Where the Hebrew text uses the phrase “to lie with” it indicates sexual relations, expressing not only the manner of the act but also the context that departs from permissible covenantal norms.
- 26 THIS HAS LED SOME SCHOLARS TO CONCLUDE THAT THE PASSAGES IN LEVITICUS 18 AND 20 REFER EXCLUSIVELY TO CULTIC PROSTITUTION AS THE WORD TRANSLATED “ABOMINATION/DETESTABLE” RELATES TO FERTILITY CULT CUSTOMS AND PRACTICES. Mary Douglas in *Leviticus as Literature* concurs with the Jewish scholar Hyam Maccoby in relation to ‘Leviticus and abomination’ that “what Leviticus forbids is not homosexuality as understood today (in other words a permanent orientation), but homosexual acts performed by heterosexuals” and she also cites the molestation cited in Genesis 19 (the Sodom narrative) as another clear example of this.
- 27 Having made these observations I am aware that other scholars like David Peterson take a different view. He states that “since marriage and sexuality are fundamental to our existence as men and women, it is not surprising that we see strong links between the provisions of Leviticus and the teaching of Genesis 1-3. The Levitical laws define the way in which he argues God’s intentions for marriage are to be guarded.” However this raises a deeper question as to how those who have a permanent sexual orientation understand the concept of the image of God in humankind.
- 28 The Sodom story in Genesis 19 has generated much hostility to the image and status of homosexuals. Yet when we read the narrative there is no clear indication of the sexuality of the offenders. Genesis 13:13 describes them as “wicked, great sinners”. They intended to rape Lot’s guests and contrary to the custom of that time pursue a policy of gross inhospitality. Sodom gave its name to the sexual act that the Israelites normally associated with cult male prostitution. In Deuteronomy 23, 1 Kings 14, 15 and 22 and also 2 Kings 23, the King James Version uses the term ‘sodomite incorrectly (in the modern sense). Reliable modern versions now correctly translate the Hebrew word (קדש) variously as ‘male temple prostitute’, ‘sacred male prostitute’ or ‘male shrine prostitute’. The

treatment meted out to these cult prostitutes shows how the people of Israel felt about the sexual practices of Canaanite fertility cults.

- 29 The men of Sodom were heterosexual intent on humiliating strangers by treating them like women and the fact that all the men of the city were there makes it unlikely that all the intended rapists were homosexual. The contrary viewpoint seems to me to have little weight that all were homosexual and Lot handed over his daughters because of revulsion of same sex eroticism. Much more likely is the high value Lot placed on hospitality so that he was prepared to sacrifice his daughters for the protection of his guests. The relatively low value placed on women at that time may have been a contributory factor. Ancient Hebrew culture was patriarchal. Nakedness was regarded as shameful; women were regarded as unclean for seven days after their menstrual period and intercourse was forbidden during that period on pain of death; polygamy was accepted (Deut. 21:15-17); female captives could be forced into marriage and then discarded (Deut. 21:10-14)
- 30 In Judges 19:16-28 we find a similar story to that of Sodom, except the culprits were from the tribe of Benjamin and their actions included violent heterosexual rape leading to the death of the guest's concubine, although they initially demanded that the male visitor be given to them. Like the story in Genesis 19, this passage is more about xenophobia and the unwillingness to practice hospitality than about homosexuality which some read into it.
- 31 There are at least 1,604 NT citations of 1,276 OT passages in the second part of the Christian Canon. I hope I will be forgiven for citing just one which has a profound echo in Genesis 1:27. It is from Galatians 3:28; "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." NRSV
- 32 Here are three of the most basic characteristics of our human existence set in polarity but draw together in Christ; a) **Jew/Greek** – (ethnic, political, cultural and religious); b) **Slave/Free** (legal status, social identity, economic standing and class distinction); c) **Male/Female** (sexual identity and gender roles).

- 33 But these distinctive traits in terms of kingdom values no longer identify us in terms of our relationship to Christ. The Greek word for “or” (*oude*) appears in the first two declarations but shifts in the final one to “and” (*kai*). Previous translations KJV and RSV in my opinion mistranslated the final declaration and rendered it incorrectly as “there is neither male nor female.” However in 1989 the NRSV rendered the Greek more accurately as “there is no longer male and female”. Does this carry a more profound insight for the same-sex gender debate? Galatians mirrors the Greek version of Genesis 1:27 – “So God Created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; **male and female** he created them.” The challenge for the Church is: Could gender complementarity and gender identity be no longer the final arbiter in God’s kingdom?
- 34 The journey from a non-affirming church to a welcoming and affirming one in the whole gamut of sexual orientation will be a slow and painful one. There are still sharp divisions in the whole field of biblical studies about textual interpretation of those sections of Scripture which appear to refer specifically to the issues of same-gender relationships. Some still want to interpret these texts to render all gay and lesbian sexual conduct as morally illegitimate. Others argue that the scope of these prohibitions should be understood against their social contexts and should provide an opening for renewed understanding of the different cultural milieu of the 21st century. All Christians must utterly condemn any form of homophobia and value gay and lesbian people as fellow human beings made in the image of God. Many gay and lesbian people form lifelong relationships that are exclusive and faithful. However, if a heterosexual person is without a partner, he or she may nurture hope of a union the church will bless. Sadly the opposite is the case for gay and lesbian people as they will be encouraged to renounce such a hope. I want to be part of that journey of inclusion and welcome. W S Johnston in his challenging book – *A Time to Embrace – Same Gender Relationships in Religion, Law and Politics* (2006) puts it courageously “the struggle of gay, lesbian and other gender-varied people and their families for liberty and equality is still at the beginning stage.....the debate has already produced deep divisions in our

society. It will no doubt take some time before these divisions can be fully healed, before a church and society emerge that are truly welcoming and affirming.”

Rev Dr James Williamson - December 2015