

# INTIMATE CONVICTION 2



**CONTINUING THE DECRIMINALIZATION DIALOGUE**

H I V   L E G A L   N E T W O R K

*Intimate Conviction 2: Continuing the Decriminalization Dialogue* was originally intended to be an in-person conference held in Barbados. When the scope of the COVID-19 pandemic made it clear that international travel and close quarters would be off the table, the decision was made to move the conference online and preserve this important conversation. We would like to extend our warm thanks to our Barbadian friends and colleagues who worked so hard to make this conference a reality, no matter what the format. Special thanks go to Fr. Clifford Hall, host pastor, for welcoming us all as his virtual flock, and to Alexa Hoffmann for her dedication to seeing this conference go forward.

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### **About the HIV Legal Network**

The HIV Legal Network ([www.hivlegalnetwork.ca](http://www.hivlegalnetwork.ca)) promotes the human rights of people living with, at risk of or affected by HIV or AIDS, in Canada and internationally, through research and analysis, litigation and other advocacy, public education and community mobilization.

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# Introduction

*Maurice Tomlinson*

In 2017, the HIV Legal Network (then the Canadian HIV/ AIDS Legal Network) and Anglicans for Decriminalization hosted a two-day conference examining the role of the Church in anti-sodomy laws across the Commonwealth. That conference, *Intimate Conviction*, brought together academics, activists, church officials and politicians from around the world for an inspired conversation. The conference was extremely well received and resulted in the publication of a volume of essays that has since been distributed to lawmakers across the Caribbean region.

But as remarkable as that first conference was, we had the feeling that there was still work to be done. There were more perspectives to be shared and other regions of the world to be considered. We needed to continue to the conversation. And so we began to plan *Intimate Conviction 2: Continuing the Decriminalization Dialogue*. Originally conceived as another in-person conference, the gathering moved to Zoom once the scope of the COVID-19 pandemic became clear. Over the course of three half days, we welcome more than 30 expert speakers who shared their knowledge and experience with guests who logged in from around the world. This second volume is a selection of those presentations.

The criminalization of same-sex intimacy still exists in nearly 70 countries. Many of these countries justify these homophobic laws by using Church teachings and biblical interpretations. Many of these laws in Commonwealth countries also date back to colonial times, bringing another layer of complexity. These two conferences and publications aim to break down these justifications by showing that they are built on a faulty foundation. Homophobia and anti-gay laws have no true basis in theology and religion should never be used to justify hate. By bringing these speakers together and by publishing their words, we hope to continue to make change around the world.

Maurice Tomlinson

LGBTQ Rights Consultant with the HIV Legal Network  
and conference organizer



## Foreword

Winnie Varghese

Dear Friends,

It is an honor for me to offer something at the beginning of this important volume. Thank you, Maurice and Sean, for your prophetic leadership.

Strangely enough for religious people, ultimately it is the civil law that tells most of us who we are and what is possible in our lives. If we are not very intentional, society tells the church what work its theology is allowed to do. What does it mean to a teenager living in the city's drainage system or on the fringes of a village that God's love is for them? What are we doing when we say that the glory of the cosmos is present in their very flesh, as the law names them as criminals. What does it mean when the church says your lives and family are just slightly less valuable or legitimate than others in our church, even if the law says otherwise. We have to get this right in both arenas. A body does not survive on poetry. The mind and heart struggle to imagine what has not been seen.

The work of *Intimate Conviction* is so important. The requirements of human rights law from the international community for full inclusion and more. Theological frameworks and approaches to the Bible that celebrate rather than condemn a diversity of sexual and gender expressions and more. Personal stories that demonstrate what the current situation does to fragile, human flesh. While the legal, pastoral, and theological work is so very important within the disciplines that must be reformed towards more justice and inclusion, I wonder if the most profound work that Maurice and Sean and their co-conspirators have taken on is the work of making visible new futures, equipping imaginations to dream.

In my life, the Rev. Dr. Pauli Murray and W. H. Auden are among those influences. Pauli Murray was a gender queer, Black, Episcopal priest. We don't know how she would have defined her gender given the opportunities today, but in her time, she was the first Black woman ordained, the year after women could be ordained in the Episcopal Church. Her biographers write that the vocation of priest was her true vocation. She was also a lawyer, and renowned for her work on U.S. civil rights cases and in the first years of independent Ghana. She generated the thesis that won the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, which declared the segregation of American schools unconstitutional. Desegregation, while not yet achieved, defines a new America, one in which equal opportunity is afforded to all who live in this land. So far beyond the imagination of most Americans today. How did she do that? How did she live her truth as a queer woman, here in New York, write poetry and her own story, a story it took a leap of imagination to know to tell. A story of a family, white and Black, slave owner and slave, creatively

adapting to support one another. There were no stories like that when she wrote *Proud Shoes* and became a celebrity in the 1950s. My guess is it had something to do with the church, which was also profoundly prejudiced in her time. She was the first woman on the vestry of a church I once served, and she could see and name the complexity of her existence, including in her racial identity. A remarkable legal and theological imagination fueled by her faith.

In that same church in the East Village here in New York, into which the poet W. H. Auden used to shuffle on Sunday mornings in his house slippers — I found a copy of a letter he once sent to the rector asking why the altar clothes were gone. The church was famous for its liturgical innovations. The letter was furious and, of course, beautifully written. He concluded with something like “unless of course you’ve sold them all and given the money to the poor.” That would be just fine.

Auden lived out loud his entire life, especially in those days in New York, befriending Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker Movement, and all of those great utopians, who believed it was important to imagine a just and beautiful future, for all of us, and to fight for it. What is left to us is their poetry. What the writers you are about to read in this book offer is the scaffolding for the poetry of a future. A future for all of us. One that wrestles with colonial and cultural legacies to imagine a future more beautiful than has ever been. A future that loves freedom. A future in which no is cast out in the name of God.

The Rev. Winnie Varghese  
Trinity Church Wall Street

# **Keynote Address: How the Roman Catholic Church in Guyana and/or the Caribbean Views the Anti-Sodomy Law**

*Bishop Francis Alleyne*

Thank you for the invitation and for the material that was presented at the last Intimate Conviction conference. I found the material very helpful, informative, insightful and valuable for ongoing conversation and dialogue. Bishop Terry Brown, in his presentation, said something that resonated with me: “No other language was available and fear was still the norm.” Limited language and fear. Having read the presentations from the last conference, I came away with a bigger vocabulary and with somewhat less fear. Thank you for those presentations. As I attempt to offer the Catholic perspective, I do so not to make a decree or any pronouncements, even though our long-established doctrine sometimes carries that tone, but with the hope of offering something to an important dialogue, something that can be freeing and life-giving and hopefully add to the vocabulary.

The Roman Catholic Church is organized into conferences of bishops and dioceses. In our region, there are 19 English-, French- and Dutch-speaking dioceses that make up the Antilles Episcopal Conference (Appendix I). The Catholic presence in the region varies considerably from diocese to diocese, suggesting varying levels of influence that the Church may have in different territories. The anti-sodomy laws at present apply to nine countries, or 11 dioceses, in the region: Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica (3 dioceses), St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Barbados.

In 2001, the bishops of the Antilles published a document titled “Statement on Homosexuality and Homosexual Behavior” (Appendix II). The opening paragraph states:

*The contemporary political pressures to change legislation in order to decriminalize consensual homosexual activity are now present in the Caribbean Region. The discussions, already quite emotional, have raised two major issues for the Catholic Church. The first issue is that the people must understand the doctrinal/moral teaching of the Church on homosexuality. The second issue is that, in the context of the discussion to change legislation, the teaching of the Catholic Church on homosexuality must be communicated clearly, accurately and continually by the Church to the Caribbean Region.*

The topic was sufficiently present in the region in 2001 to evoke a statement from the bishops. In essence, it states that sexual activity outside of the male-female covenantal relationship for the purpose of procreation is disordered and

morally wrong. The statement does not express whether the law should be removed from the books but cites a communication of Church teaching, which says:

*No matter how the debate on decriminalizing adult consensual homosexual activity ends, the teaching of the Church will remain unchanged and the pastoral outreach of the Church will continue to manifest the reconciling love of the Lord.*

As is often the case when a subject of such an organic nature comes under review, there is a tension between the established doctrine or teaching and pastoral concerns. There is a body of official teachings on one hand and real people on the ground on the other. The bishops, in their 2001 statement, declared:

*While the Church is obliged to preach the truth, it is also obliged by the love of Christ to provide quality pastoral care to persons who have a homosexual orientation and who may be struggling with homosexual behavior.*

In 2015, the bishops of the Antilles issued a statement entitled “Marriage: A Covenant between a Man and a Woman” (Appendix III). At that time, there was discussion and debate in the region about the legal recognition of same-sex marriage. In many of our dioceses, priests are licensed by the state to register marriages, and there was some speculation that should it come about that same-sex unions would be granted legal recognition then marriage officers of the state may be required to comply. But that is another matter, which has its own doctrinal, legal and pastoral tension. In the bishops’ 2015 statement, reference is made to the decriminalization of the anti-buggery law:

*Respect for others, however, does not imply approval of the life styles contrary to the traditional ones, even if and when the State were to decriminalise the anti-buggery law, always bearing in mind that legality does not make a thing moral. Our duty, under all circumstances, is to express love and concern as we remain firm in the faith of our Fathers fostered and maintained by God’s Holy Spirit.*

In my conversations with individual bishops, I gleaned that decriminalization is not a front-burner issue for them in their respective territories, but generally they would have no objection having these laws removed from the books.

In Guyana, the existing laws, as I have come to understand them, are seldom invoked, and when they are, it is often by law enforcers who intend to victimize members of the LGBTQ community. Having listened to the reports of discrimination and sought advice on the scope of these laws, I have no doubt that these laws in Guyana should be made null and void.

That, in short, is what I see to be the present disposition of the Roman Catholic Church in the region and in Guyana. What I would like to share in this pre-

sentation are my views on some possible pastoral initiatives that would better dispose and equip people to process ideas surrounding this particular topic and other controversial and emotional topics in general.

In 2013, the Caribbean Development Research Services Inc. (CADRES) prepared a report titled “Attitudes toward Homosexuals in Guyana.” I judged this initiative to be very helpful in that it put some specifics on the table. It moved the conversation from vague assertions and generalizations to naming the attitudes, giving some clarity as to how prevalent they were and the groups or areas where they originated or were promulgated. Given that there have been violent outbursts against the LGBTQ community in Guyana, one may be left with the impression that there was a high level of phobia — and the report did find very strong views against homosexuals, with survey respondents stating that they should be severely condemned, beaten, imprisoned and even hanged. The study also revealed that, in fact, there was a high percentage of respondents who expressed tolerance and acceptance. When people were polled about the anti-sodomy laws, many did not know of them, and when these were explained, they thought that the laws were illogical.

There are two things I wish to infer from the report. One is the evidence that even among those who may have been generally dismissive and even condemnatory of homosexuals, when asked their views “if the person was a member of family, a friend or colleague at work,” the responses weighed much more on the side of compassion and acceptance. Here is an invitation to pastoral outreach: we belong to each other; every person is endowed with dignity and worth, deserving of utmost respect. In his most recent encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis articulates the belonging and the fuller expressions of life we are called to celebrate when we build communion. He makes reference to the global efforts of integration among the United Nations and the European Union, and similar efforts in Latin America. And we can think of our own Caribbean Community (CARICOM). On the pastoral level, which I believe would go a long way, the faith bodies would create the spaces where people could celebrate their common humanity.

I call to mind an account given to me by an elderly soul, a good Catholic, well-cued into the Church’s teachings, who estranged herself from her nephew because he was gay. One day she was informed that her nephew was dying of AIDS-related causes. After some struggle between her loyalty to her understanding of Church teachings and her loyalty to family, she went to visit her nephew. When she met her nephew’s friends and saw the manner in which they were looking after him, she came away with a very different disposition towards her nephew and his companions. This account is an example of a person’s “vocabulary” increasing while putting fears to rest.

The other reference from the report that I want to draw on is the mention that was made of a connection between religious groups and the expressions of antipathy, intolerance and condemnation.

Another story. A few years ago, I sat with other religious leaders in a consultation conducted by the Ministry of Education on corporal punishment. The dominant contributions to the consultation were passionate quotes from the various holy books that beatings and chastisement or the rod or whip were necessary components in the formation of the human being. The contributors further testified how much they benefited from being on the receiving end of such treatment and thus strongly advised that corporal punishment be kept in schools. It made me wonder what happens in our homes. Corporal punishment is formation by fear. So often the default response to a topic is to find a scriptural reference that says something about that topic and quote it authoritatively: the Bible says, or according to St. Paul, Moses, the Book of Leviticus, Sodom and Gomorrah. In doing so, we hide behind texts, we sidestep our responsibility to real people in real circumstances in real time. While I have gone off topic in mentioning corporal punishment, I am referencing a similar manner of response to a controversial subject from religious bodies. If we are going to draw on the texts of scripture, certainly from the point of view of Christianity, texts, particularly the Gospels, are there to challenge and push back boundaries to promote life and open ways and possibilities for all peoples to attain a fuller stature. At the heart of Christianity is the teaching that we form and nurture life and relationship through love. In the words of St. John: “In love there is no room for fear, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear implies punishment and no one who is afraid has come to perfection in love” (1Jn 4:18). I believe that the scriptures of other faith traditions would offer similar counsel as would the more modern insights of the behavioural sciences. These texts are sometimes avoided as the way of love asks much more of us; it requires us to accompany, to walk with others and discover their gifts with them, to be available to the other, to be patient and give affirmation and encouragement.

There are numerous texts, particularly in the Gospels, that we can cite that, in various ways, point Christians to assuming responsibility for their lives and the lives of others, especially minorities and vulnerable persons and groups — and to do so with compassion and in service with generosity and with a sense of sacredness and respect. These ought to be the texts we first go to if we are looking for a supportive word from scripture. These are the texts that would foster communion, put people in touch with each other and equip them to better negotiate the unclear and uncomfortable tensions that may arise when we encounter the unfamiliar. These are the texts that would give us words and quell our fears.

Thank you for this opportunity to share.

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*Bishop Francis Alleyne was born in Trinidad & Tobago. He studied engineering at the University of the West Indies before entering the monastery at Mount St. Benedict in 1973. He was ordained priest in 1985 before being elected Abbot of the monastery in 1995. He was ordained Bishop of Georgetown, Guyana, in 2004.*

# Global Solidarity and Reducing the Vicious Cycle of Inequality for the LGBTQ Community

*Dr. Edward Greene*

This intervention has been structured around my 21 years of active involvement in relevant policies and programs at both regional and international levels engaging with parliamentarians, faith leaders, youth leaders, representatives from the private sector, academia, civil society, the LGBTQ community and those living with and affected by HIV. Altogether, my associations with these groups, individually and at times collectively, have taught me that to make an impact on human development and change one has to be proximate. By “proximate,” I mean “grounding with,” so as to better understand and champion the plight of the marginalized, the most affected, the neediest. As a result, I can tell you that, whether defending access to affordable medicines as a human right or empowering women and girls, or supporting the inclusion of comprehensive sexual education in our schools, or protecting the human rights of lesbians, gays, bisexual and transgender people — whatever the cause — the goal must be to **leave not one individual behind**. And so, I will attempt to establish from my experience a broad template for overcoming challenges to achieve inclusiveness, equal rights and social justice for all.

I am glad to note that some of my colleagues in faith from the Caribbean region are engaged in this dialogue and will speak to specific inflection points within those areas for promoting a shared vision and equality. I am particularly grateful for the experience through my involvement in the Pan Caribbean Partnership Against HIV/AIDS (PANCAP) Justice for All programme with Dereck Springer, its director, and Canon Garth Minott, chair of the Regional Consultative Steering Committee. It is encouraging to note that faith leaders have fully endorsed the five principles of the PANCAP Justice for All programme, which also became a prominent template for action among other stakeholders, including parliamentarians and civil society leaders at the local, national, regional and international levels.

## **Table 1: Key Principles of PANCAP’s Justice for All**

- Enhancing family life and supporting those in need
- Increasing the access to treatment and affordable medicines
- Reducing gender inequality including violence against women, girls and children
- Promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights, including age-appropriate sexual education



- Implementing legislative reforms to eliminate stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV

The first and overarching principle of Justice for All, in particular, embraces the impulses of Christianity: contrition, gratitude and love. These impulses are best expressed in Matthew 25:31–40 as the kingdom of mercy where strangers will be welcome, and love is the driving force.

The principles of Justice for All further illustrate how the AIDS movement brought to the fore stigma and discrimination and the need to care for the marginalized. HIV also exposed the fault lines in society and taught us that in order to protect society as a whole, we have to protect everybody. The more recent ecosystem has made it clearer that the struggles to eliminate discrimination against the LGBTQ community, as an essential precondition to ending HIV/AIDS, are comparable to the conflagration of the Black Lives Matter movement against institutional racism across a global social consciousness, and those confronting the devastating effects of the coronavirus pandemic.

In the search for solutions to all these issues, we turn to science and empirical research for guidance to our policies, and most relevant to this gathering, to underscore our prayers and supplication. What we learn can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2: General Configuration of Challenges to LGBTQ Communities**

- LGBTQ individuals encompass all races and ethnicities, religions and social classes.
- LGBTQ individuals face a range of social and economic imbalances, chief among which are health disparities linked to societal stigma and discrimination.
- According to UNAIDS more than 65 countries criminalize same-sex relations, including eight that impose the death penalty.
- Denials to their civil and human rights are pervasive.
- Discrimination against LGBTQ individuals has been associated with high rates of psychiatric disorders, substance abuse and suicide.
- LGBTQ individuals frequently experience violence and victimization, which have long-lasting effects on them and their communities.
- Personal, family and social acceptance of sexual orientation and gender identity often affects the mental health and personal safety of LGBTQ individuals.

More specifically, we learn that the social determinants affecting the health of LGBTQ individuals largely relate to ill-treatment and prejudice, as noted in Table 3.

**Table 3: Social Determinants Affecting the Health of LGBTQ Individuals**

- Legal discrimination in access to health insurance, employment, housing, marriage, adoption and retirement benefits.
- Gay men are 28 times more likely to contract HIV than the general population.
- Transgender people, who account for an estimated 0.1 to 1.1% of the global population, are 13 times more likely to contract HIV.
- Lack of laws against bullying in schools.
- Lack of social programs targeted to and/or appropriate for LGBTQ youth, adults and elders.
- Shortage of health-care providers who are knowledgeable and culturally competent in LGBTQ health.

In Table 4, we learn also of the huge differences in socioeconomic disparities affecting LGBTQ individuals.

**Table 4: Socioeconomic Disparities Affecting LGBTQ Individuals**

- LGBTQ youth are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide.
- LGBTQ youth are more likely to be homeless.
- Lesbians are less likely to get preventive services for cancer.
- Gay men are at higher risk of HIV and other STDs (in the US, this is especially true among people of colour).
- Lesbians and bisexual women are more likely to be overweight or obese.
- Transgender individuals have a high prevalence of HIV, STDs, victimization, mental health issues and suicide, and are less likely to have health insurance than cisgender individuals.
- Elderly LGBTQ individuals face additional barriers because of isolation and a lack of social services and culturally competent providers.
- LGBTQ populations have the highest rates of tobacco, alcohol and other drug use.

These disparities are interconnected with the long and storied tradition of advocacy for human rights and social justice through scholarship, research and activism. In all these facets of consciousness, the church and its leaders are expected to play a vital role.

**How Faith Leaders Are Handling These Challenges**

The 2017 Intimate Conviction conference, sponsored by the HIV Legal Network, examined the church and sodomy laws across the Commonwealth and assisted in constructing the intellectual infrastructure for a high-quality conver-

sation with faith leaders. In the Caribbean, PANCAP, in collaboration with the Regional Consultative Steering Committee, has advanced beyond discussion, to engagement and involvement of LGBTQ individuals in addressing the specific challenges.

Major lessons learned in the PANCAP Justice for All consultations are that faith leaders, and more specifically, church leaders, are by no means homogeneous. It is reasonable to distinguish between the church as institution and the church as organism. As an institution, the church is a formal organization, like government and schools, with a purpose, plan, structure, officers and mission. In the case of church work and church workers, social problems and policy proposals are addressed through synods and denominational boards. As an organism, the church is a body or communion of believers, not a unified organization but an aggregate of individual believers. In addition, there are differences between religious and theological orientations in much the same way as one would classify varying political or academic strands as progressive, moderate or conservative — and of course there is the non-religious: the agnostic to the atheist. Wherever on this spectrum one is located, Christians, individually or collectively, or in their institutional or organic roles, are called upon to be responsible, compassionate and law-abiding citizens.

Church or Kingdom work can benefit from the empirical evidence of studies and reports that focus on the tensions that exist in the global struggle for reducing inequalities and increasing inclusiveness of the LGBTQ community. These are highlighted among others in the October 2019 report from the UN Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity and the PANCAP 2017 report on human rights and social justice in the Caribbean with a focus on the LGBTQ community.

Recommendations from these reports, in which LGBTQ people are involved, provide the pillars for advocacy. Yet in the Caribbean, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Model Anti-Discrimination Bill, endorsed by CARICOM Attorneys-General in 2012, is yet to be implemented at the national level despite the Parliamentarians Sensitization Forums convened by PANCAP from 2017 to 2019. Notwithstanding widespread commitment of PANCAP stakeholder groups — faith leaders, parliamentarians, civil society and youth — to the Justice for All Roadmap, there is resistance to approve the elements that call for eliminating the laws that discriminate against LGBTQ individuals. While Caribbean faith leaders' unprecedented declaration to end the AIDS epidemic by 2030 has been adopted in principle, several elements of the institutional church have either retracted from their commitments or have led demonstrations against the court decisions in Belize and Trinidad and Tobago to abolish discriminatory laws against same-sex relations.

## **Outstanding Questions and Positive Global Interventions**

What is so difficult about understanding that discriminatory laws and socio-cultural norms continue to marginalize and exclude lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse persons from education, health care, housing, employment and occupation, and other sectors? Why is there resistance in recognizing that access to economic, social and cultural rights is hampered by discriminatory laws that have negative impacts on individuals, their families, groups and communities?

### **Table 5: Global Interventions as Guides to Policy and Actions**

- UNESCO held the first-ever International Consultation on Homophobic Bullying in Educational Institutions.
- The World Bank aimed to fill the LGBTQ data gap, focused on inclusion in markets, services, and other spaces.
- UNDP developed a set of 51 proposed indicators for the LGBTI Inclusion Index, aligned with the framework of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals to identify who is “left behind” and why.
- UNAIDS illustrated that states have a moral and legal obligation — under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, human rights treaties, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and other international instruments — to remove discriminatory laws and to enact laws that protect people from discrimination.
- An International Labour Organization study (2019) has shown that trade unions and employers have worked to promote the meaningful inclusion of LGBTQ people in the workplace, adopted by businesses in Europe.

## **Why Abolition of Sodomy Laws Matters: Where Are We Positioned in the Arc of Social Justice?**

Homosexuality is a part of the human experience. It is not relegated to one race or ethnicity. It is perhaps the strongest obstacle to embracing full equality for our LGBTQ peers. Originally, sodomy laws were part of a larger body of law — derived from church law — designed to prevent non-procreative sexual relations anywhere, and any sexual relations outside of marriage. As the gay rights movement began to make headway, especially in the last 15 to 20 years, and the social condemnation of being gay began to weaken, social conservatives increasingly invoked sodomy laws as a justification for discrimination.

Nowhere did unmasking the ambiguity to social justice materialize more than in the 2020 Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the US, which had a worldwide ripple effect. Here was acknowledgment that all human beings deserve to be

treated fairly; to have equal protection under the law; and to have corresponding access to all the services and conveniences, benefits, protections and even responsibilities that go with living in a civil society. Denial of these rights, especially as it relates to sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular, derives from a very conservative interpretation of Bible teaching. Yet there is nothing in even conservative Evangelistic theology that would say that homosexuality should be criminalized, while adultery and fornication are not. In the Old Testament, they are all capital offences — like the breaking of the Sabbath.

The reality is that in our families, at our jobs, in our schools and neighbourhoods, and of course in our churches, LGBTQ people are all around us. We have adopted a sort of “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy instead of allowing our LGBTQ peers to affirm who they are and supporting them. It is puzzling that those who can speak out so strongly for racial justice or climate justice cannot speak as strongly for LGBTQ justice. Very often our appeal for LGBTQ justice is met with the refrain “But the Bible says...” Such a refrain can be understood in the context of differences in theological positions, but it becomes repulsive as a shield for animosity, venom and hatred. Dorothy Day reminds us that love cannot be demanded; it can only be responded to: “I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least.”

Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II, American Protestant minister and co-chair of The Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, puts it starkly:

*“I can’t tell you how many times I have been sentenced to hell, not by God but by human beings who want to come and beat me up with the Bible. I think I know the Bible just as well as the folks who come to me. But they seem to act like I have never read it. Yes, I have read it. There are many themes in the Bible. But to me the underlying theme is justice, love, equality, freedom and compassion. When we look at Jesus as our model, that is what we get.”*

### **Some Glimmers of Hope**

There is need to take note of glimmers of hope from leadership of the institutional church:

- Pope Francis’s call for civil union laws to apply to same-sex couples.
- Presiding U.S. Anglican Bishop Michael Curry’s recent book *Love Is the Way: Holding on to Hope in Troubling Times*. He redefines love not as a sentiment but as a commitment to human dignity and social justice.

- Catholic Bishop of Trinidad and Tobago Jason Gordon and Anglican Archbishop of the West Indies Howard Gregory of Jamaica, who succeeded Most Rev. Dr. John Holder, keynote speaker at the 2017 Intimate Conviction conference, have added their voices in support of legislation abolishing the sodomy laws.

Now Barbados is poised to become the first CARICOM member state to recognize same-sex unions. Governor-General Dame Sandra Mason announced the news at the opening of the country's new parliamentary term on September 15, 2020, saying, it was "time to end discrimination in all forms." But it remains to be seen how public opinion will go on this issue once the proposed referendum takes place; there is an expectation that several religious bodies will speak out against it. The decision of the national referendum may yet reveal the disposition of the church as organism — not only in Barbados, but also elsewhere in the Caribbean.

### **Reflections on the Future**

Throughout my journey in advocating for Justice for All, I have interacted with colleagues of faith who are okay with welcoming LGBTQ persons, as long as we can say that we are "loving the sinner but hating the sin." This has been problematic for me because of my belief that it denies the essential and authentic personhood of LGBTQ individuals. It is clear to me that our discussions at this second iteration of Intimate Conviction in 2020 are capturing a moment when the needle has been shifting slowly toward LGBTQ justice. Maybe the transformation will occur more rapidly through litigation in the courts of law. But for sure, the church as organism is being propelled by elements of the church as institution. Bishop Jason Gordon's homily on The Feast of Christ the King hails Christianity as an event that is moving the world to another stage of development through the kingdom of love and peace.

Hence, we end where we began: That is, recognizing that religious witnesses have been essential to the success of movements for justice throughout the world. While religion has always shown its progressive and conservative sides (and has sometimes been an uneasy combination of the two), faith communities have been able at critical moments to convert their prophetic power into what Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1963 referred to as "the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood [and sisterhood]." His famous I Have a Dream speech says, "we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope," which fittingly encapsulates the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. Let this consultation roll out the stone of hope.

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## Churches and LGBTQI Humanity: Learning Lessons from the Struggle

Allan Aubrey Boesak

In 1986, in the midst of the darkest times of our struggle against apartheid, my denomination adopted a new confession: the *Confession of Belhar*. The main pillars of *Belhar* are our unity in Christ, the reconciliation wrought by Christ and the justice demanded by God.

At the heart of the Confession is what we confess about God. “We believe,” *Belhar* says,

*that God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people;*

*that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged;*

*that God calls the church to follow him in this, for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry;*

*that God frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind;*

*that God supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, helps orphans and widows and blocks the path of the ungodly ... ;*

*that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need ... that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream;*

*that the church, as the possession of God, must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged ...*

*[italics added]*

Succinctly put, *Belhar* confesses God’s radical, indivisible justice; God’s radical, indivisible equality; God’s radical, indivisible inclusivity; and God’s radical, indivisible solidarity. So while *Belhar* came into being in apartheid South Africa, the confession itself rises above and reaches far beyond racism and apartheid.

The Dutch Reformed Mission Church, the church I was born into, was established in 1881 as an apartheid church, the result of the white Dutch Reformed Church’s racist, white supremacist ideologized theology and the desire of the white colonizers of my country and of my people to exert complete domination over the colonized, in society and in the Church. For three quarters of a century, under control of white missionaries, my Church did not utter one word of protest against colonization, imperialism or apartheid. But since the Soweto uprising in 1976, we found our voice and mounted serious and increasingly intense resistance against the regime and the Church that provided apartheid’s biblical, moral



and theological justification. In that time, and in the decade that followed, thousands of members of our Church, especially its youth, would be fully and wonderfully involved in the struggle for freedom and racial justice in South Africa. This prophetic church in South Africa had taken leadership in the struggle in a way never seen before.

I was the moderator of my church and in the chair during that memorable 1986 General Synod session where the prophetic church came into full bloom. The adoption of *Belhar* was a crown jewel of what African-American theologian Gayraud Wilmore would call the rise of radical, Black Christianity.

I tell you all this for a reason. It was within this context that I was approached by a colleague who pleaded with me to table a strong resolution in support of LGBTQI rights. In light of what was happening, the Church was ready, he argued. I was certainly ready for such action. My own personal, theological and political convictions on the matter were clear. Yet I hesitated. Would we not cause a backlash, create new tensions, perhaps even undo what we had achieved? Would the Church have the courage to go that far? I hesitated, and finally turned him down. I have come to regret my hesitation. Perhaps it was not the courage of the Church that was in question. Perhaps it was my own. There is such a thing as a Kairos moment: a God-given moment that calls for discernment, decision and bold actions of faith. Perhaps that was such a moment, and I did not discern it. In the years that followed, as I witnessed the injustices and indignities heaped upon LGBTQI persons, saw the horrific dangers to their lives increase and their exclusion from acceptance in the Church intensify, my activism grew. But my regret for that moment of fatal hesitation never left me.

So here is the first lesson for those of us involved in these ongoing struggles for justice, dignity and the recognition of full humanity for LGBTQI persons. **Have a Kairos consciousness, a spiritual and political alertness, for the moments that provide an opportunity for the struggle to advance.** Never underestimate the power of God's Holy Spirit when, where and while She is at work. She blows where She wills, Jesus taught us, and there is no telling where we may end up if we allow that wind to take us where She wills.

At its 2008 General Synod, the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa considered a report on the Church's stand on the question of sexual orientation and nonconformity. That was a moment, in my view, in which this Church — which had declared apartheid a sin, its biblical and theological justification a heresy and led the ecumenical movement in doing the same, and which in formulating in 1982 and adopting in 1986 the *Confession of Belhar* as a new standard of faith — faced its greatest challenge since confronting apartheid.

I was the convenor of that task team and presenter of the report at the synod. It was one of those utterly shattering, fundamentally life-changing experiences.

After a hostile, and theologically disturbingly crude, debate, the synod rejected the report, its contents, its conclusions and its recommendations calling for justice for LGBTQI persons and referred the report for reconsideration. Even though the words, “another, more anti-gay report” were deleted from the amended version of the original proposal, the intention could not have been clearer.

What was striking and shocking, even though hardly unknown in debates on this matter it seems, was the stridently hostile tone of the debate, the blatant homophobic, bigoted language that dominated the discussion all through the afternoon. Speakers who took the floor did not even attempt to disguise their contempt. Some spoke openly of LGBTQI persons as “animals” and “not created by God,” and of bestiality and LGBTQI persons in one breath, all of which as being a “scandal” and “stain” upon the Church.

It was an experience that had left me shaken and disoriented: how could the same church that took such a strong stand against apartheid and racial oppression; gave such inspired and courageous leadership from its understanding of the Bible and the radical Reformed tradition; had, in the middle of the state of emergency of the 1980s with its unprecedented oppression, its desperate violence and nameless fear given birth to the *Confession of Belhar* that spoke of reconciliation, justice, unity and the Lordship of Jesus Christ now display such blatant hatred and hypocrisy, deny so vehemently for God’s LGBTQI children the solidarity we craved for ourselves in our struggle for racial justice, bow down so easily at the altar of prejudice and bigotry? How could it be that we who had rescued the Reformed tradition from the heresy and blasphemy of the theology of apartheid of the white Dutch Reformed Church and forged a new identity for that tradition in struggles for justice and compassion were now the ones embracing that heresy in our howling condemnation of our own flesh and blood because of their different sexual orientation?

And here is lesson two: **We should not assume that churches, like the Black Church in South Africa and in the USA, with strong credentials in struggles for racial justice, will show the same commitment in the struggles for the justice and dignity of LGBTQI persons.** But this raises serious questions for the church in South Africa as a whole, that Church that stood so prophetically against the vicious inhumanity of apartheid during the struggle for freedom. The same questions arise for the church in Africa and elsewhere. Should we expect those who, in their own struggles against racist and colonialist oppression, leaned so heavily on the exodus metaphor as inspirational in the struggle to take that paradigm one step further? In other words, will those who stood so firmly on Exodus 3:7 (“I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry ... and I have come down to deliver them”), now, as wholeheartedly, embrace Exodus 23:9 (“Know the heart of an alien, [meaning the Other] for

you were aliens in the land of Egypt”)? Will they understand that LGBTQI persons are made into aliens in their own land, strangers in the church, exiled from our love, consideration and compassion? Will they understand that all outsiders, like they once were in the country of their birth, are worthy of inclusion, and that that inclusion is God’s intention? Will they understand that LGBTQI persons are not outsiders “by nature,” as if God willed it so, but are made into outsiders by our sinful acts and attitudes, by our hateful rejection of those God has had the temerity to make in God’s image, but not in ours? For us the answers may be obvious. But let us not make assumptions that prolong the pain of our LGBTQI family.

What called forth the most ire by far at the synod, however, was the fact that the report interpreted the *Confession of Belhar* in a way that called for solidarity with LGBTQI persons, and for them to be embraced and included, in the same way that *Belhar* calls for justice and dignity for people of colour in a racist dispensation. Probably the best-known words of *Belhar* are the words that echoed in the Church’s conviction that “the church must stand where the Lord stands”: namely, with the wronged, the poor, the destitute and powerless against the powerful; and against *any* form of injustice and oppression. The report took the view that these categories included all those oppressed, despised, rejected, marginalized and excluded from meaningful life as a result of their sexual orientation.

The report argued its assumption that the Church’s embrace and acceptance of *Belhar* cannot but bring the Church to accept and embrace LGBTQI persons in the fullest sense of the word. That means that the Church accepts:

1. That LGBTQI persons, on the basis of their faith in Jesus Christ as personal Saviour and Lord of their life and of the Church, are without any reservation full members of the church of Jesus Christ.
2. That LGBTQI persons deserve justice in the same way the Church claims justice for the destitute and the wronged, both before and under the law, in civil society and in the Church, and the Church commits itself to actively pursue that justice in all areas of life.
3. That our commitment and calling to unity and reconciliation require that LGBTQI persons, as confessing members of the Church, have access to all the offices of the Church, including the office of minister of the Word.
4. This access should, in the interests of justice and pastoral concern, not be prejudiced by demands for celibacy if the relationship is one of love, respect and genuine commitment. Should the criteria for heterosexual married persons apply, the Church must then take a decision on support for, and the blessing of and officiating at same-sex marriages as allowed by the Constitution of South Africa.

Now let me say a word about the word “embrace.” Churches, as my own did at the previous synod in 2004, often take resolutions that speak of “embracing”

LGBTQI members. Those sentiments may not always be intentionally hypocritical, but they are purposely vague and therefore meaningless — a fig leaf behind which we often hide our fears and our discomfort with the LGBTQI Other, and consequently, our resentment at the God who created them. We must not confuse superficial sentimentality with Christian love. Neither must we confuse “embrace” with “tolerance.”

We speak of “embrace” while in reality we intend only to tolerate LGBTQI persons, so long as they do not embarrass us by being themselves too openly; so long as they do not shame us by unashamedly loving each other as if their love is of the same quality as ours; and so long as they do not think that their equality before God equals equality in our eyes in the Church, where we have to guard against the immorality of the Constitution that dares to differ from our perverted reading of the Scriptures. “Embrace” means active inclusivity. It does not tolerate any notion of distance. Not in terms of membership, nor in service or in ministry in any sense of calling recognized by the Church. The only yardstick here, as it is with all members of the Church, is “true faith in Jesus Christ.” That is the meaning of unity, reconciliation and justice. Inasmuch as that is denied, or something added to, I argued to my Church, we are reinstating the heresy we have accused the white Dutch Reformed Church of.

The response of the synod was shocking. So shocking that I, that very day, announced my resignation from all positions in the Church. I did not resign my membership or annul my ordination in that denomination, but I simply could no longer be an official representative of a church that so openly flouted the love and justice of God, the calling of prophetic truthfulness, embedded solidarity and simple, human compassion. In deciding that my ordination in a denomination was not equal to my calling, I decided also that my calling now was to fight that particular battle elsewhere.

This brings me to lesson three. **My church was ready to accept the *Confession of Belhar*, but it was not ready to accept, and stand by the consequences of that confession.** *Belhar* confesses God as the God of radical, indivisible justice; radical, indivisible equality; radical, indivisible inclusivity; and radical, indivisible solidarity. Hence *Belhar*’s insistence that we stand against *all* forms of injustice, wherever they may be found, and against *all* the powerful and privileged, who in their greed and corruption, their sense of entitlement and destructive solipsism are maintaining our country’s scandalous status as the most unequal society on earth — against all bigotry, baptized or otherwise; all patriarchy, sanctified or otherwise; against all homophobia and transphobia, deified or otherwise. And with *Belhar*, we reject every ideology that justifies these, every policy that legitimizes these and every theology that sacralizes these. But the moment *Belhar* called for solidarity other than with our Black selves, to stand against

oppressions other than against our Blackness, to fight for justice for others not denied by the colour of their skin, we balked, looked the other way, stepped aside and let them be despised, targeted and killed. It is not responding to the pain of our own selves that makes us compassionate. It is recognition of the pain of others that makes us compassionate. Not knowing that is not just brutally unfaithful. It is almost unforgivable. It is certainly inexcusable. Churches, always ready for great statements, are not always ready for the consequences of those statements. Hence the need for prophetic voices to speak truth to power.

As a result of this unfaithfulness, my church hardly has any credible voice when it comes to these urgent matters in Africa.

In South Africa, LGBTQI persons are victims of all kinds of abuse and violence, including murder and so-called “corrective rape” by gangs of thugs, especially of lesbian women, a perverse kind of “therapy” to make them change their “deviant” ways now that they know what “real” sex with “real” men is like. This is on the increase despite South Africa’s constitutional protection of the rights of LGBTQI persons, including their right to marriage. For us, this violence constitutes an immediate crisis, since it is, for God’s LGBTQI children, literally a matter of life and death.

When then president Jacob Zuma appointed that rabid homophobe, journalist Jon Qwelane as South Africa’s ambassador to Uganda of all places, there was huge public outrage. And rightly so. It made me proud. But what made me inexpressibly sad was that my church, the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, did not join that chorus of righteous outrage. We could not, dared not, because just the year before we had proven ourselves just as rabidly homophobic, filled with just as much hatred, drenched in just as much hypocrisy and bigotry as the designated ambassador and the man who appointed him.

Thirty-one African countries use colonial-era laws (brought there by the colonialists, not confirmed as an authentic African tradition rooted in the wisdom of *ubuntu*) that legitimize discrimination against and criminalization of nonconformist sexual orientation and love. At the forefront of the battle for these shameful outcomes are the Christian churches.

The rest of the world is not doing any better. LGBTQI hatred is growing: in Viktor Orbán’s Hungary, in Poland, in multiple Latin American countries and in many parts of America. And everywhere, the church — vessel, instigator and nurturer of a virulent, violent, sanctified bigotry — is at the heart of it. In Russia, Vladimir Putin, the KGB agent turned president, seeks wider public support for official homophobia, and his first port of call is the church, a perfect partner for his brutal authoritarianism.

Can we step back from the brink and find our prophetic voice, our Christian integrity, our Gospel authenticity, our Jesus-inspired compassionate justice again?

Here let me offer lesson four: **We should never lose hope.** In this struggle, we cannot do without it. I do not mean the “hopeless mania for hope,” as American journalist and social critic Chris Hedges calls it. That maniacal hope that mystifies reality, and hence cripples, paralyzes and disempowers us. I am speaking of hope the way African Church Father Augustine does. Hope, he says, is a mother with two daughters. She named them Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are and courage to not to allow things to remain the same. Hope as anger that burns. Hope as courage that transforms. If we lose hope, somebody loses their life.

There is something else. On the last Sunday of September, at the invitation of the leadership of my church, I was asked to speak to the Church on the relevance of the *Confession of Belhar*. I reminded the leadership of our history of tension on this matter, my resignation and my ongoing critique of the Church’s position since. They recognized all that but still wanted me to speak, since my “voice was needed,” they said. So I did. And the responses were astounding. My hope was rekindled. Is this perhaps a sign of a new hearing and understanding, and even conversion? But the Spirit blows where She wills.

But here is a deeper reason for my hopefulness. The church, *Belhar* proclaims, is “the possession of God.” Jesus is Lord. What does that mean? It means that God (the God of Jesus of Nazareth, not the false god that blesses slavery, apartheid, genocide and oppression) is a God of justice, and that God calls the church (that is, those of us who call upon the name of Jesus and seek to follow him as his disciples) to follow God in this . . . that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need (no excuses, exceptions or compromises), which means that the church must witness any form of injustice so that justice may roll down like waters and righteousness, like a mighty stream; that the church as the possession of God (not the possession of the privileged and powerful, the strong and the loud-mouthed, the arrogant and the bigoted, the cowardly and the indifferent) should stand where God stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged. If we truly believe this, and enact it, the angels in heaven will rejoice in our faithfulness and the world will be a different place.

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# SECTION ONE

THE CHURCH AND DECRIMINALIZATION  
IN THE CARIBBEAN AND LATIN AMERICA





## Making Good Trouble!

*Fr Clifford Hall, Host Pastor*

Jesus predicted it. So many have come here from east and west to share together in the garden of God, whose face, whichever way we turn, is always upon us and whose compassion is for all that's been made. We're here, as my prayer book tells me, not as separate streams but as countless currents in a single flow. We're life in its manifold oneness. We all hunger for wholeness. We've come to understand through the lens of love in our hearts and not, dare I say, through our capacity to read and swallow wholesale the "sins of scripture." It's time to put those things, those "precepts of men," away.

We've come to speak from compassion and love — and forgiveness. What's the good in being a Christian, a follower of Jesus our Master, if all one practices is the shallowest judgmentalism on behalf of an old man in the sky, as is supposed by so many still, who works His divinity through orders backed by threats? Can that be a God of Love? And what's the point of being a legislator, of being Caesar, in lands which are not theocracies, if the legitimate interests and rights of an authentic and honourable social group are ignored because of the protestations of the Christian 'right,' whose understanding of God and Biblical texts has not moved beyond the first century, who ignore the teachings and life of our brother and friend, and the flights of love of the Holy Spirit down the arches of the years?

So many speak as if the significance of a person's sexual orientation is something recently discovered. Well we're fortunate. The great ones are here with us: Socrates, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Francis Bacon, Erasmus, Byron, Tchaikovsky, Diaghilev, Nijinsky, A. E. Housman, Walt Whitman, Oscar Wilde, Marcel Proust, T. E. Lawrence, Ivor Novello, Nureyev, Benjamin Britten, Dylan Thomas, James Broughton, Allen Ginsberg, Alan Turing, so many more — and all gay or bisexual. How could God possibly have touched all these with that most divine quality — creative genius — if in the grand scheme of things their sexual orientation mattered one jot in heaven? We stand with Gamaliel. If it lasts, it's of God. And that's how it is.

People can be very cruel, and all the more heart-breaking when that cruelty strikes in the name of religion. If that's religion, keep it. We're sick and tired of your infantile Biblical literalism. We're sick and tired of hearing that we're an "abomination" to God, that we're "animals," "lepers," that our lifestyle is "chosen," that we're "deviants," that with the right counseling therapy we can be "cured." You've caused enough harm to innocent people, who are as divinely made as you are. We're not beggars. We're asserting our inalienable humanity.

So stop judging, stop playing God, and open your hearts to the sacred Spirit of love within you. We all have it. There's one Life in all our lives. Don't you know that yet?

But understand this. We don't hate you as you hate us. No. St. Brigid was right. "It is a virtue and a prize to suffer insults for the sake of God." We were born to love, you see. There's no other way, is there? So we want you to accept us, to become our friends, that we can share earth's goodness with you, share our lives in the one divine Life. That's the prayer of this conference for you. Remember: at some time or other we've all cried ourselves to sleep, so don't let's laugh at each other anymore. Maybe, as the song tells, "someday we'll all have perfect wings."

But there are two others here with us. Archbishop Desmond Tutu is one. I have his signed photograph here before me. Here he is. Can you see? He stands with cross held high before him. As you probably know, his daughter, Mpho, is lesbian and she found in her daddy the most supportive parent anyone could wish for. On my photograph are the words "God bless you" — so there you are. He's here in spirit. I wonder if you know the story of Rev. Franklyn Shaefer, once a pastor in the United Methodist Church in the U.S. He solemnized the gay marriage of his son, Tim, and was denounced by his church. It's all recorded in his book, *Defrocked*. What resilience, courage, love — truly a child of Jesus!

Our other guest? Well, her presence came as a shock, but in truth I should have known. I realized while Chancellor Dr. Edward Greene was speaking. In his presentation he quoted from Mother Teresa and, as he spoke her words, I had the most glorious vision of Mother Mary standing upon a rainbow, with arms outstretched to us. My eyes welled with tears and the words "children of Mary" came to me. It's a phrase in the *Lourdes Hymn*, but I didn't know that then. The children? Well, make of it as you will. But remember this. When Jesus looked from the Cross at his Mother, he entrusted her to John and, as Pope Francis reminds us, we are all present in the apostle. "As Mother of all," he said, "she is a sign of hope for peoples suffering the birth pangs of justice. .... As a true mother, she walks at our side, she shares our struggles and she constantly surrounds us with God's love." So yes, the Holy Mother is most certainly with us.

Well, the Preacher had it right. Perhaps here in Barbados it's now a time "under the sun" to heal, to build, even to dance — and smile. Twice.

As you may know, in September 2020 it was announced in Barbados that government will introduce legislation for the courts to recognize same-sex unions. Let's call them 'partnerships.' Same-sex marriage will be put to the people in a referendum. Now you can't have same-sex partnerships unless you first repeal section 9, Sexual Offences Act 1992, the buggery offence. For some reason, government has been silent on that. Yet it's because of that crude and antiquated

type of legislation that pressure for change has, for years now, been applied to Caribbean countries, particularly within the Commonwealth. Barbados' answer, through the Governor-General, in September?

*If we wish to be considered among the progressive nations of the world....a society as tolerant as ours [cannot] allow itself to be 'blacklisted' for human and civil rights abuses or discrimination on the matter of how we treat to human sexuality and relations. My government will do the right thing....no human being in Barbados will be discriminated against, in exercise of civil rights that ought to be theirs.*

Yes, a cause to smile. But then the prophet — beloved Pope Francis in October 2020. “What we have to create is a civil union law. That way [LGBTQ people] are legally covered.” Well, Italy has had a same-sex civil union law since 2016. Bless him, Pope Francis has repeatedly affirmed LGBTQ persons. Do you remember? “God made you like this and loves you like this,” and “Who am I to judge?”

The response here in Barbados to the government announcement? Well, newspaper editorials have been favourable. There've been some other wonderfully supportive newspaper contributions in letters and feature articles. But then, the Christian fundamentalists, the Pharisees of our day, have been writing too — and zealously marching — in opposition. Here's a snippet of a letter from a pastor. “Acceptance of the LGBTQ agenda is an acceptance of lies and twisted truths.” And then: “Legalization [of same-sex intimacy] leads to legalization of any conceivable lifestyle... and cripple our Caribbean society.” Where do they get it from? And then another, from a reverend purporting to speak for all Barbadians: “It will legalize abominable acts,” and remove the “cultural, moral and spiritual pillars on which our country is built.”

She doesn't say what these “pillars” are. What about illegitimacy, concubinage, mean spiritedness, playing around, adultery, living together out of wedlock, absentee fathers, gold digging, dress code obsession, homophobia and Pharisism? The idea of ‘Christians’ marching against a principled, authentic social group, demonstrating their legal and Biblical ignorance in the process, and with words of hate on their lips and placards, makes them — well what? I'll leave that to you and Jesus.

There's nothing new in any of it. It's been spewed out here for years. It makes the Christian faith, like the “aged man” in *Sailing to Byzantium*, such “a paltry thing, a tattered coat upon a stick.” Whatever else, it's not the love which Jesus taught. A heterosexual friend in U.K. described the ‘Christian’ marching as “vile and disgusting.” I find it difficult to disagree. Yet we're not disheartened.

Jesus calls us as we are. And in response, like the aged man, let each soul in us “clap its hands and sing” — yes, and “louder sing.” Byzantium is ours too. It’s the Love within, the Love in the deep heart’s core. But be ready. It’s a Love too that’s on the wing. In the Athenry fields, the “small free birds fly” again.

Decriminalization of buggery? It’s been a world-wide phenomenon for decades — except in the lands of religious zealots. Meanwhile, the stars remain in their courses, and the earth hasn’t caved in on itself. But yes, well done Belize and Trinidad and Tobago for decriminalizing it. And more wonder: the landmark decision of the Caribbean Court of Justice in 2018 in *Fraser & Others*, the case of the Guyanese cross-dressers. The magistrate had held the accused’s conduct was “unchristian,” and that they must go to church to give their lives to Jesus. You what? It’s a paradigm of what we face here. You can’t be you and Christian according to them. The CCJ held Guyana’s cross-dressing law unconstitutional. *Per* Justice Saunders: “Law and society are dynamic not static.” Yes, we’re in Caesar’s world now.

The standard secular argument against decriminalization is that it will encourage pedophilia; on the other side, that it’s not the law’s business to interfere in the private lives of citizens.

Let’s be clear. In the criminal law here in Barbados, as in most of the common law world, two principles predominate when it comes to sex. The first is consent. You can’t have sex without it, and the consent must be given by someone capable of giving it. A child, an animal, an inebriate, a sleep-walker, a mentally-challenged person can’t give it. Pedophilia is out. Decriminalization doesn’t increase the risks. The second relates to the place where the act is done. You can’t do it in the street, in any public place, and it doesn’t matter what sort of sex it is or with whom. Go home to do it!

Now if these conditions are met, why would Caesar differentiate between buggery and vaginal sex? Many heterosexual couples routinely practice buggery anyway. And sure, it’s not the function of the criminal law to punish sin. If it were, why isn’t adultery an offence, or having sex before marriage? Mercifully, we’re not a theocracy.

Punishing ‘sin’ is simply not the law’s function. The Wolfenden Committee Report, published in the U.K. in 1957, made that abundantly clear. The function of the criminal law, it said, is “to preserve public order and decency, to protect the citizen from what is offensive and injurious, and to provide sufficient safeguards against exploitation and corruption, particularly those who are specially vulnerable.” The rest “is not the law’s business.” Well, it took 10 years, but in 1967 buggery was decriminalized in England. Caesar triumphed!

But why hasn’t Barbados followed suit? Why do we allow the former colonial master to rule us from his grave? Don’t talk about Old Testament texts.

Israel decriminalized buggery in 1988! Don't argue either that section 9 is rarely enforced so there's no need to decriminalize. Obsolescence can't possibly be a serious ground for retention. And don't say it offends Black cultural norms. Angola, Botswana, Gabon, Lesotho, Mozambique, and South Africa have all decriminalized. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Benin, and Ivory Coast there was nothing to decriminalize anyway. Yet what makes Black people so very different from South American, Indian, and Asian people? *De Colores*. The folk song tells of the infinity of colours. They're all pleasing to God, and each of us carries the divine light of diamonds. One world. One humanity. One love.

Now in a sense we've come home. In 2017, the then Bishop of Barbados and Archbishop of the West Indies, Dr. John Holder, delivered a paper at the first Intimate Conviction Conference in Jamaica in which he conclusively made the case, using a contextual approach, that the standard gay-bashing Biblical texts, which Bishop John Spong calls the "sins of scripture," simply can't be used to justify repressive penal laws against LGBTQ people. There wasn't anything entirely new in what he said, but the fact is he said it. His approach was light years from the primitive literalism of those who oppose us: 'It's there. It says God said it. End of story.' His paper wasn't reported here, not even by the Diocese. Why?

Pope Francis has rejected that primitive approach too — indeed, all reputable scholars have: "The Word of God... precedes and exceeds the Bible," Francis said once.

*This is why our faith is not only centred on a book but on a history of salvation and above all on a Person, Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh. Precisely because the horizon of the divine Word embraces and extends beyond Scripture, to understand it adequately the constant presence of the Holy Spirit is necessary....*

The Bible is not sealed, he said. It's not closed to interpretation and must be read contextually "enlightened by the Spirit of truth." Of course. It's "the Spirit that gives life."

Very well. You can't separate Biblical texts from their contexts and the literary forms in which they're expressed. So if the context is the purity and preservation of the tribe in face of captivity among the heathen, as in the Leviticus texts, or points to the overarching power of the law of hospitality, as in the Sodom story, or the nature of the human condition, illustrated by Paul's interminable sin lists and somewhat dotty story of why people are gay (as modern scholars suggest Paul was himself) and lesbian, how can you use them and say they're God's infallible Word for everyone, in all circumstances, and for all time?

Now nothing I've said is intended to deny the authority of scripture. As a witness to divine revelation, it's unique. Yet it too must be interpreted afresh in

every generation and in every context. The Holy Spirit ever calls us to listen, gives us new insights in every age. The heart of our faith is the Gospel. God was incarnate in a man not a collection of books about the history of the tribe of Israel. The Bible points us to Christ. It doesn't imprison him in words. Jesus lives in us, through us. Us. He's ever the Jesus of you and me.

With Him, there was no 'us' and 'them.' There was only us, all of us. Everyone is the centurion's servant, Zacchaeus the tax collector, the woman at the well, the leper, the Canaanite woman. None were 'second class' and all were welcome. Jesus never suggested we hate the sin but love the sinner. 'Hate' was never a Jesus word. No. He spoke only of loving God, loving your neighbour, loving your enemy — only love. There was no 'eye for an eye.' With Presiding Bishop Michael Curry in *The Power of Love* sermon at the Royal Wedding in 2018, quoting Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: "We must discover [its power]...And when we do that... we will make of this old world a new world, for love is the only way." Yes, it's ever the "balm in Gilead" which will "make things right."

Yet because of these "abominable" Biblical texts the law says you get life imprisonment if you express your sexual orientation. Whether you believe it's original or acquired really doesn't matter. It's an orientation which touches the very core of our humanity and transcends differences of race, culture, class and creed. If LGBTQ people are displeasing to God, I'm sure He'll sort it out. But He hasn't since time began. Deal with that.

And then again, when the bigots speak of Christianity, whose Christianity do they speak for? Well, it can't be the U.S. Episcopal Church, that's for sure; nor the Anglican Church of Canada; nor the Scottish Episcopal Church; nor the Anglican Church of South Africa; nor the Quakers; nor Unity; nor the various Inclusive Churches around the world; nor even the good old Church of England. And the Roman Church? Well, with Pope Francis it's more than feeling its way. The powerful writing of James Martin, S.J., exemplified by *Building a Bridge*, has been well received. Reviewers from the College of Cardinals have stressed that "LGBTQ Catholics...are as much a part of our church as any other Catholic." But, in any event, what the bigots preach really can't have been culled from the Gospels, can it? Jesus only showed love to those allegedly caught by the Law.

As I say, not even the good old Church of England. Don't be too hard on the Established Church. For one thing we have the outcome of the *Living in Love and Faith* process to look forward to. In 2017, to celebrate 50 years since buggery was decriminalized in England, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York issued a joint statement that it was time people stopped condemning LGBTQ people as the first response to their orientation. They referred with approval to the communiqué issued by a majority of the Primates of the worldwide Anglican Communion a year earlier, which Archbishop Holder helped draft. Yes, it condemned the U.S.

Episcopal Church for its stand on same-sex marriage. That was page one of the communiqué, and it was reported here. Remarkably, what wasn't reported appeared on the second page. This is what it said:

*The Primates condemned homophobic prejudice and violence....*

*The Primates reaffirmed their rejection of criminal sanctions against same-sex attracted couples.*

*The Primates recognise that the Christian church....has often acted in a way [towards LGBTQ people] that has caused deep hurt. Where this has happened they express their profound sorrow and affirm again that God's love for every human being is the same, regardless of their sexuality, and that the church should never by its actions give any other impression.*

They couldn't be clearer, could they? By God's grace, the Bishop of Barbados is listening to this. So look, Barbados. LGBTQ people are not damaged goods. We treasure them. Jesus treasures them. Like the rest of us, they are "wonderfully made." That's why I ever have in mind, for everyone, these words of the Sufi poet, Rumi: "Come, come, whoever you are, wanderer, worshipper... it doesn't matter. Ours is not a caravan of despair. Come, even if you have broken your vows a thousand times. Come, yet again come, come." Yes: "He who comes to me, I will in no wise cast out." Remember? And it's why I ended my address to the marchers at the first Pride March here in Barbados in 2018 with these words of Jesus too: "Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

Let me end with some marvelous words of the late Senator John McCain, which, for me, rest at the heart of who we are as followers of Christ. McCain's words are a trumpet call to us all, a call which says that those who oppose us will never suffocate our hope and resolution, will never vanquish our spirit. And it's a call too for those we wish to stand with us.

*I have faith that you understand that assaults on the dignity of others are assaults on the dignity of all humanity. You will not look upon tyranny and injustice....as the inevitable tragedy of man's fallen nature. You will see them as a call to action — a summons to devote your time and talents to a just cause that is greater than yourself, the cause of human rights and dignity. Make this your legacy....*

Well people, isn't that the passion in the heart of Jesus? John Lewis would have called it "making good trouble"!

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## **The Baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26-40): Gender Ambiguity in Early Christian Antiquity?**

*Ian E. Rock*

The baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch appears to be integral to the ecclesiology and theology of the Lukan church, indeed to the all-inclusive character of this particular community. It stands at the beginning of the gentile mission in such a way that it acts as proof, through its appeal to ethos, of accepting the physically defective in the early Christian church, that the new eschatological community saw itself as fulfilling the Abrahamic covenant. From the beginning of Luke's gospel and continuing through the Acts of the Apostles, we see the fulfillment of the Isaianic prophecy of all-inclusive salvation.

The location of this pericope before the commencement of the gentile mission is of strategic importance. This paper attempts to examine the pericope using narrative analysis and narrative criticism, along with grammatical and lexical analysis, and refer to the principle of intertextual reading, but not devoid of the socio-historical location; it is, therefore, an interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary (postmodern) approach. It attempts to unfold the story of the text by careful analysis of the story world; that is, the world inside the narrative, which is for the most part an imaginary world, as it seeks to critique, correct and transform the world behind the text.

It is strictly an exegesis (what the text could possibly have meant then) and not a hermeneutic (what the text means to us now), though the former must by necessity inform the latter. The approach, therefore, is based on the presupposition that the surface narrative of the text is the place where the worlds of the text and the world behind the text confront each other, a location where analysis can occur. It further accepts the presupposition that the story of the text is to be experienced by the reader of the text.

While narrative criticism has been widely applied to the Pauline epistles, and to some extent to the gospels, its application is not as widespread as historical-based critical analysis. When we speak of narrative criticism as the analysis of the story world, it must first be understood that story is the message and meaning conveyed by the text. Narrative criticism sees the story of Jesus and the attempt by various authors to understand and map the human cognition and worldview of Jesus.

The story of Jesus is defined as God's redemptive activity in the world, which is the fulfillment of God's past promises, and the resulting attempts of communities to enter this redemptive sphere in such a way that the character, attitude and activity of the community is shaped in its response to this primordial story.

Exegetes who have employed narrative criticism have further expanded the map of the story to include the story of the world gone wrong, the story of Israel in that world, the story of Jesus whose story arises out of the story of God as creator and redeemer, and the story of the community that is the interaction and existential hermeneutic that flows from the foregoing stories. To these it is important to add, on the one hand, the story of the main character or characters and, on the other hand, the story of the author.

The story is a historical artifact that therefore cannot be separated from its first-century contextual composition, from time, place and culture, but more importantly from its lexical, linguistic and rhetorical composition and *Sitz im Leben*. In this way, the story becomes the locus of experience not only for the first century but also for the present-day reader. The reader, however historically defined, cannot be emotionally and culturally separated from the story. The reading experience of the first-century reader as it approaches the goal of the author approximates the ideal reader, even though in reality, however, there is no such thing as an unbiased reader.

The goal of the narrative critic is to read against the bias of the traditional exegete, to read against the grain. It is a particular ideological reading. In order to do this, the social location of the author and of the reader must first be stripped of dogmatic and doctrinal bias and any attempts to impose the norms of modern civility and ecclesiological presuppositions. Doctrinal and dogmatic affirmations of the identity of the eunuch in antiquity with modern-day ecclesiological constructs must be avoided.

One clear example of how these may affect the authenticity of a reading is demonstrated in an article by Francis J. Moloney. Maloney recognizes the historical awkwardness of using the term “eunuch” on the lips of Jesus in Matthew 19:10–12 and asserts:

*[The] word [eunuch] was offensive and crude, and would never have been “invented” by the early Church and placed on the lips of Jesus. The saying must have originally been on the lips of Jesus and it has been preserved, despite the use of such a crude word, precisely because he said it. ... It is an offensive enough expression, but in antiquity, where eunuchs were an estranged part of society, it seems impossible that the early Church would have Jesus say that “there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs because of the kingdom of heaven.” ... The attitude of the ancients to eunuchs was decidedly negative ... It is unthinkable that the early Church would have spoken of its members with this word, or that Matthew himself would have called his Gentile converts “eunuchs.”*<sup>1</sup>

Moloney's dogmatic presupposition causes him, without offering critical scholarship, to reject the word on the basis of its crudeness, and argue for celibacy, even though celibacy was not pervasively associated with the eunuch in antiquity. To engage in the story is to debunk these assertions and ask critically: How was the term eunuch to be understood in antiquity? What was the early church seeking to achieve in this narrative? How do the characters and citation blend together in the narrative to create a new symbolic universe? What was the ultimate objective of the narrative? How was the narrative accomplishing this?

It is from this perspective that we make the bold thesis that the story of the eunuch is absorbed in the stories of Jesus, of Israel, of God and functions as a paradigm for Christianity in early antiquity to show that even the most repulsive of characters was accepted in the new eschatological community of Christ-believers.

### **The Eunuch in Greco-Roman Culture, Society and Literature**

The essential story, therefore, flows from an understanding of the character and social location of the eunuch, and the reflection of Tertullian serves as a good point of departure. So, Tertullian wrote:

*If Philip so easily baptized the chamberlain, let us reflect that there had been interposed a manifest and conspicuous evidence that the Lord deemed him worthy.<sup>2</sup>*

Notwithstanding that Tertullian noted that Jesus and Paul were eunuchs, his statement above raises the question: What would have deemed such a person unworthy? Certainly, if celibacy was the only defining mark of the eunuch, then why the adversity? Traditionally, the eunuch has been identified in terms of his employment, that is, as a court official or chamberlain. Added to this is the interpretation that flows from the etymology of the word; that is, "the keeper of the bed." This interpretation is suspect, since it was widely known that eunuchs were employed in a variety of other offices since they functioned primarily as slaves within the household.

In Greco-Roman society and culture, slaves had no right to the use of their bodies, which belonged to their masters. For a better understanding of this, it is necessary to perform an investigation of secular literature. Results clearly demonstrate that, contrary to popular belief, the eunuch was not necessarily a celibate person. In fact, evidence shows that castration and mutilation were often times linked to pederasty and to same-sex unions. Suetonius, commenting on the life of the emperor Nero, wrote:

*[Nero] castrated the boy Sporus and actually tried to make a woman of him; and he married him with all the usual ceremonies, including a dowry and a bridal veil, took him to his home*

*attended by a great throng, and treated him as his wife.*<sup>3</sup>

Here we see the highest official of the Roman state engaging in the practice of castrating a male slave in order to prolong his youthful beauty so as to maximize sexual engagement. Likewise, the use of the eunuch for sexual pleasure is reported in the account of the life of the emperor Titus. So, Suetonius noted that:

*Besides cruelty, he was also suspected of riotous living, since he protracted his revels until the middle of the night with the most prodigal of his friends; likewise of unchastity because of his troops of catamites (male prostitutes) and eunuchs...*<sup>4</sup>

Suetonius's reference to an action by another emperor, Domitian, affirms that the practice of castration and mutilation was often time for the purposes of sexual exploitation and/or commerce. Evidence from the writings of jurists Paulus and Marcian shows that this practice seems to have continued into the late Roman empire.<sup>5</sup> So, Suetonius writes:

*[Domitian] prohibited the castration of males, and kept down the price of the eunuchs that remained in the hands of the slave dealers.*<sup>6</sup>

But according to Cassius Dio, that did not mean that Domitian, like Titus, did not engage eunuchs sexually. So, Cassius Dio writes affirming Suetonius on the one hand, but disclosing this reality on the other:

*Accordingly, though he himself entertained a passion for a eunuch named Earinus, nevertheless, since Titus also had shown a great fondness for eunuchs, in order to insult his memory, he forbade that any person in the Roman Empire should thereafter be castrated.*<sup>7</sup>

The eunuch of antiquity was a public spectacle, a person to be despised, to be excluded, to be derided. He was the laughingstock of the community. So much so that Publius Terentius Afer's play *The Eunuch* was acted twice in the same day and earned more money than any previous comedy of any writer, namely eight thousand sesterces.<sup>8</sup> In an honour-shame culture, the eunuch represented those at the very bottom of the social and cultural system. The eunuch did not have the prerequisites to share in public life; his type was not allowed to participate in the cult and worship of the community.

Several Greek and Jewish writers of the period record these attitudes for us. Lucian of Samosata thought that the eunuch Bagoas should be disallowed from having the chair in philosophy in Athens.

*It was not at all permissible for Bagoas to lay claim to philosophy and the rewards of merit in it, since he was a eunuch; such people ought to be excluded, he thought, not simply from all that but even from temples and holy-water bowls and all the places*

*of public assembly, and he declared it an ill-omened, ill-met sight if on first leaving home in the morning should set eyes on any such person. He had a great deal to say, too, on that score, observing that a eunuch was neither man nor woman but something composite, hybrid, and monstrous, alien to human nature.*<sup>9</sup>

Lucian's description of the eunuch as neither man nor woman would seem to construct such a person as a third gender, of ambiguous sexuality. Lucian continued to describe the eunuch as a person who "had been marred from the very first and was an ambiguous sort of creature like a crow, which cannot be reckoned either with doves or with ravens"<sup>10</sup> (in modern parlance, "neither fish nor fowl").

Josephus and Philo noted the attitude of ridicule that pervaded among Greek-speaking Jews of the first century that reflected their symbolic boundaries and codes of purity. So, Josephus wrote:

*Let those that have made themselves eunuchs be had in detestation; and do you avoid any conversation with them who have deprived themselves of their manhood, and of that fruit of generation which God has given to men for the increase of their kind: let such be driven away, as if they had killed their children, since they beforehand have lost what should procure them; for evident it is, that while their soul is become effeminate, they have withal transfused that effeminacy to their body also. In like manner do you treat all that is of a monstrous nature when it is looked on; nor is it lawful to geld men or any other animals.*<sup>11</sup>

Philo of Alexandria likewise notes that the eunuch was one to be excluded from Jewish worship, even though he admits that such people had mingled in the assemblies:

*[The Law] excludes all who are unworthy from the sacred assembly, beginning in the first instance with those who are afflicted with the disease of effeminacy, men-women, who, having adulterated the coinage of nature, are willingly driven into the appearance and treatment of licentious women. He also banishes all those who have suffered any injury or mutilation in their most important members, and those who, seeking to preserve the flower of their beauty so that it may not speedily wither away, have altered the impression of their natural manly appearance into the resemblance of a woman.*<sup>12</sup>

While Philo's and Josephus's comments would have been in keeping with the received tradition that encapsulated the story of Israel from a particular point of view, that is, from a dominant reading of the Torah, and which would have been true to the laws of purity found in Leviticus (Lev. 11:9–12; 21:19–20) and the

regulations governing worship in the Jewish Temple to be found in Deuteronomy (Deut. 23:1), they both reflected the contempt and scorn that the character of the eunuch attracted.

Finally, that the eunuch of the text is the male attendant of a female royalty only serves to heighten suspicion. In the contemporary Roman world, male eunuchs were known to engage in non-penetrative sex with women. This form of sexual activity was frowned upon by Roman culture, since it diminished male misogyny. But the eunuch was not concerned with the preservation of manly reputation.<sup>13</sup> Undoubtedly, this too would have contributed to the reading scenario of the character of the eunuch.

### **The Intertextuality of the Isaianic Citation in Acts 8**

In addition to the ways in which the first-century Mediterranean reader of this text would therefore have had reflected on the cultural norms and practices of the day, consideration also has to be given to the intertextuality of the text (Isaiah 53:7–8, Acts 8:32–33) — the text that the author of the Acts of the Apostles has the eunuch read:

*Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter;  
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,  
so he does not open his mouth.*

*In **his** humiliation justice was denied him.*

*Who can describe his generation?*

*For his life is taken away from the earth.*

John D.W. Watts, in his commentary on Isaiah 34 to 66,<sup>14</sup> locates these verses in what he designates as the tenth of twelve acts (Isaiah 52:13–57:21), which deals specifically with the restoration pains of Jerusalem. The reading is attributed to the tenth generation and contemporary to the reign of Darius (518–465 BCE).

The citation of Isaiah in the Acts of the Apostles intensified the humiliation of the suffering servant of Isaiah by adding the genitive of the third personal pronoun (*aujtu*) after (*tapeinwvsei*) to emphasize that the suffering is personal, though this pronoun is absent from the Isaianic text. In addition to this, the wider rhetorical contour of Isaiah 56 (52:13–57:21) that deals with the restoration in Jerusalem includes in an unusually way a section that speaks to the restoration than the inclusion of the eunuch in the eschatological community in this way:

*Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say, “The LORD will surely separate me from his people”; and do not let the eunuch say, “I am just a dry tree.” For thus says the LORD: To the **eunuchs** who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than **sons***

*and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. [emphasis added]*<sup>15</sup>

It is difficult to read this particular text and not to come to the conclusion that the eunuch (*saris*) is theologically comparable with, adversative to and yet equal to sons (male) and daughters (female), a reading that potentially constructs the eunuch as a third gender.

In this way, the story of the eunuch as an individual is closely embedded in the story of Israel. The pericope from Isaiah, reflects a period of hope for Jerusalem during the reign of Darius/Xerxes 518–465 BCE. The expectation of a reconstituted Temple in which all the old forms of taboos have been removed is affirmed, and a more all-inclusive approach to Temple worship is anticipated. This inclusion covers also the foreigner — the alien in the midst however defined, who is always the concern of Yahweh, who joins himself to the Lord. In first and second Temple Judaism, the former was accepted with much ambivalence. These were gentiles after all, and there were Jews who were not prepared to give them the full covenantal rights. Watts demonstrates this ambivalence by comparing the attitude in Isaiah to that of another contemporary, Ezra, whose policies stood in stark contradiction to those enunciated here.

### **The Ethnicity of the Ethiopian Eunuch**

The eunuch of Acts 8 is a foreigner, an Ethiopian, a person who in contemporary Greek literature shares the same ambivalence. According to Homer, the Ethiopian is blameless, but according to Herodotus, and Pseudo-Aristotle, this ethnic group is to be “held in the least of honour” and “cowardly” respectively. And yet in Isaiah 56, in the story of Israel, the foreigner is described as joining himself to Yahweh, ministering to him — that is performing services in the Temple, loving the name of Yahweh — devoted to him beyond the acts of worship themselves, and becoming his servants.

But the story of Israel in this pericope is one in which the original understanding of Israel as cosmopolitan and ethnically varied is implicit. It functions primarily as a reconstructive narrative of the early confederacy which included persons on the basis of their allegiance to God as a covenanted community. It was this understanding that formed the primordial narrative, for example, in Exodus 19:1–20:21; it is found in the theology of the book of Deuteronomy; and it is the understanding of Joshua 24.

According to Watts, commitment and acceptance of responsibility are to be more important than birthright, and in the same way that Israel-Jacob despised his birthright and was found acceptable, so others are now considered worthy to reenter into the covenant relationship. In the same way that Yahweh has repeatedly worked through Israel’s and Jerusalem’s failure to keep covenant, and in the same

way that Yahweh had to accept their unwillingness to do what he wants, so too Yahweh opens the invitation to all who are committed to doing the will of God, to those who seek after justice, or keep the covenant and the Sabbath.

Accessibility is now open to all. The Ethiopian eunuch, a foreigner of ambiguous sexual identity, the most despised and derided of the social groups, the third gender of antiquity, is the one who is the recipient of God's healing, redemption, restoration and inclusion in the new eschatological community in Isaiah. And this is where the narrative embraces the story of God.

### **Historical Reality, Theological Interpretation and Conclusion**

The story of God is to be understood as a given from the beginning of the pericope in the Acts of the Apostles. But it is the story of God that also drives the core understanding of the text from Isaiah's perspective. God's invitation to the social downtrodden and his universal openness is to be found throughout the Acts of the Apostles (10:34–35, 43; 11:38). And in the case of the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch, the story of the divine, which is encapsulated in the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit, is not to be underestimated. It is an angel of the Lord that offers the instruction to Philip to intersect the journey of the eunuch (Acts of the Apostles 8:6).

After this imperative, Philip appears on the scene and it is the Spirit, the primary actant in the text, who instructs Philip to join the chariot (8:29); it is in the Spirit that Philip begins to proclaim the good news about the Lord Jesus Christ (8:35); and it is the Spirit that removes Philip from the scene once the baptism had been completed. Implicitly, it is the Spirit that drives the rhetoric and the action of the pericope. But the first-century reader would have also recognized that it is the Spirit that is emphasized in the gospel of Luke.

The Holy Spirit is there in the ministries of John the Baptist (Luke 1:15–17); of Jesus (1:35; 3:16, 22; 4:1, 14, 18; 10:21); in the life of Elizabeth (1:41, 42); Zechariah (1:67–69); the song of Simeon (2:25–35); and in the ministry and mission of the disciples of the Lukan church (12:10–12; 24:49). It is in the Spirit that Jesus commences his ministry in the synagogue, and it is not without significance that the author has Jesus beginning his ministry in the Spirit with a citation from Isaiah, which is a continuation of the theme for the restoration of Jerusalem as a reconstituted Temple city in which pilgrims and devotees are welcome — a continuation of the text the eunuch is reading. It is a text in which Yahweh's anointed messenger proclaims the year of Yahweh's favour. It is not without special reference that people reacted violently to Jesus when they heard his exegesis of the text and sought to kill him, a response that is unique to the Lukan redaction of this pericope.



The themes of Isaiah 61 have been generally identified as synonymous with those of the so-called servants' songs, emphasizing suffering on the one hand but restoration on the other hand. The message in its opening verses is for the poor, the imprisoned, the broken, the disadvantaged, the oppressed, the marginalized, the stigmatized and for those who are exploited; it is not a message for the rich, the Temple authorities, for the social elite. Isaiah brings a message of comfort, of a new attitude and a new spirit of coexistence.

It is this program that Jesus identifies with in his ministry. The story of Jesus is the story of the servant anointed by Yahweh to emphasize the forgiveness of God to all people. The first-century reader would have recognized the characterization of Jesus as the saviour of the lowly, the lost, the marginalized and the oppressed; a Jesus who reaches out to gentiles and Samaritans, to women and the excluded, and to the third-gendered eunuch (Matthew 19:10–12).

The Jesus who condemns greed, the love of money, and worldly pleasures that luxury alone can afford is the one that Luke introduces to his readers in a specific cultural, political and social context. Herod is King, and Pilate is governor of Judea; Augustus and his son Tiberius are the emperor's whose reigns span the life of Jesus; Annas and Caiaphas are the high priests. All of these characters tell their stories and create the apocalyptic environment that allows Luke to recognize Jesus as the messiah, and to construct his good news of comfort and salvation, his message of victory.

Philip's question about the eunuch's understanding of the text is the opening through which the multi-layered story of the text will be explained and is to be understood. The response of the eunuch is an open invitation, on the one hand, for a greater understanding of the scriptures, but, on the other hand, it serves as a polemic against the worship of Jerusalem (8:27). For the eunuch to be coming from worship and yet seeking such understanding drives this interpretation.

The passage that the eunuch is reading is extremely selective in that it includes the story of Israel, the story of Jesus and the story of the eunuch. These three stories are simultaneously included since the metaphor of the sheep is easily transferred to Israel, Jesus and the eunuch. It is the story of the suffering innocent, a narrative that applies to Jesus, Israel and the eunuch simultaneously. Israel, Jesus and the eunuch at some time have each experienced humiliation and the denial of justice; their lives have been taken up from the earth.

Phillip's response is to proclaim to the eunuch the good news of Jesus, but that is to be reconstructed by Luke's narrative as stated in his first work and already discussed above. Luke invites us into the complex symbolic universe of the fictive novelty of the Ethiopian eunuch in such a way that the most repulsive characteristics of humanity in the Greco-Roman era are brought to the fore of the

implied reader. Contrary to the received Jewish tradition reflected by Josephus and Philo of Alexandria, these purity boundaries are erased in the new eschatological community.

The gender identity of the eunuch, his occupation with a female royalty, his ethnicity and his difficulty in understanding the festivals of Jerusalem as they related to the lived reality of his environment coalesce to create a complex character and narrative that defy the traditional and received boundaries of purity, but demonstrate that the new eschatological community of the church is not to be constrained by anthropological/ideological purity laws. For the author of Luke and Acts, this reconstitution and/or displacement of the traditional with the new will be played out in the pericope of Peter's visit to the conversion of the Roman centurion Cornelius (*Acts 10 passim*).

The eunuch readily identifies with the story of the good news of salvation that has been brought to all humankind in Jesus Christ. It creates in the eunuch such excitement to be a part of this new community, that when he sees water, he seeks baptism — inclusion in the spirit-filled community of the marginalized, the outcast, the humiliated, the outsider, whose Lord, on the evidence of the Gospel, inverts social expectations and norms.

If the good news of Jesus is as Philip has described, then what is to prevent this eunuch who is a foreigner, an alien, a despised and marginalized character, one who is of despicable colour of skin, one who is excluded from the Temple and from civil office, one whose gender is neither male nor female, from being included in the new eschatological community of the baptized — so the question *tiv kwluvei me baptisqh'nai*;. The fact that he is an outsider? A eunuch? A foreigner? An Ethiopian? The third gender? Throughout the ages, persons have been discriminated against on the basis of race, gender, ethnicity, etc. Are there lessons in this reading of this pericope for the church in the twenty-first century in the Caribbean?

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- <sup>1</sup> An example of the doctrinal and dogmatic bias of an exegete is seen in the article by Francis J. Moloney, “Matthew 19,3–12 and Celibacy. A Redactional and Form Critical Study,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 1, 2 (1979): 42–60 at 50–51.
- <sup>2</sup> Ante-Nicene Christian Library, “The Writings of Quintus Sept. Flor. Tertullianus, Volume 1,” in A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (eds.), *Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325, Volume II* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1869), p. 252.
- <sup>3</sup> Suetonius, “The Life of Nero, 28,” in J.C. Rolfe (trans.), *Suetonius II* (Harvard University Press & G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1920).
- <sup>4</sup> Suetonius, “The Life of Titus, 7,” in J.C. Rolfe (trans.), *Suetonius II* (Harvard University Press & G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1920).
- <sup>5</sup> Paulus, *Sent.* 5.23.13; Dig. 48.8.3.
- <sup>6</sup> Suetonius, “The Life of Domitian, 7,” in J.C. Rolfe (trans.), *Suetonius II* (Harvard University Press & G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1920).
- <sup>7</sup> Cassius Dio, “Epitome of Book LXVII,” in E. Cary and H.B. Foster (trans.), *Roman History, Volume VIII: Books 61–70*, Loeb Classical Library 176 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), p. 318.
- <sup>8</sup> Suetonius, “De Vita Terenti (The Life of Terence)” in J. Rolfe (trans.), *Ancient History Sourcebook: Suetonius: De Viris Illustris, c. 106–113 C.E.* Internet History Sourcebooks Project. Available at <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/suet-viribus-rolfe.asp>.
- <sup>9</sup> Lucian, *The Eunuch*, 6–11.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> F. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews – Book IV*, 8, 40, p. 290–291. Available at <https://penelope.uchicago.edu/josephus/ant-4.html>.
- <sup>12</sup> Philo, *The Special Laws*, 1, 324–325.
- <sup>13</sup> M. Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 98.
- <sup>14</sup> J.D.W. Watts, *World Biblical Commentary, Vol. 25: Isaiah 34–66* (Thomas Nelson, 2005).
- <sup>15</sup> Isaiah 56:3–5 (New Revised Standard). See, for example, Lucian of Samosata above.

# **The Church's Role in LGBTI Decriminalization and De-stigmatization: The Perspective of a Barbadian LGBTI Advocate**

*Alexa D. V. Hoffmann*

In my seven years of LGBTI advocacy, I have had sufficient engagement with the religious community to suppose that religion plays a considerable role in the de-stigmatization and ultimate decriminalization of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex (LGBTI) people, especially in the Caribbean region. During this time, as well as the years prior, I have encountered mindsets from various sects of Christianity, including the evangelical community, which I have found to be one of, if not the most dangerous opponents to LGBTI equality and freedom. Regrettably, many of the attitudes displayed by the religious community have been negative, due to both biblical tenets as well as a desire to cling to myths and misconceptions that serve to negatively portray the LGBTI community and more or less offer an “excuse” to mistreat its members.

To begin, I must offer some of my own background and what drives me to advocate for what I call the full social and legal inclusion and integration of LGBTI people. I am a 26-year-old trans woman, born and raised in Barbados. In Barbados, religion has always been a fairly big deal, influencing everything from children's choices in friends to education, politics and the law. Even those who do not identify as religious often make religious references in their everyday interactions, and more critically, in their attitudes towards LGBTI people. I have seen religion used as an emergency brake to nip undesirable behaviours in the bud, an intervention tactic against an established situation, or a perfunctory practice designed to keep up appearances. I have particularly seen religion used as a shield against a perceived social threat. I want to use this discussion to explore some of the ways in which I've seen these tactics employed, and even explain how they could be used instead to create a better society for an already heavily marginalized sector of Barbados' population (and by extension, the wider Caribbean region).

In Barbados, religion has had its way with the legislature and the political atmosphere, resulting in such laws as Sections 9 and 12 of the *Sexual Offences Act*, which criminalize “buggery” and “serious indecency,” the latter of which is understood to be any act involving the genitals “to arouse or gratify sexual desire.” Politicians have cited religion in their ardent calls to keep those laws on the books. I have also seen it used to bolster negative attitudes openly displayed by those same politicians. In 2012, then British Prime Minister David Cameron put countries criminalizing same-sex intimacy on notice when he advised that British

financial aid would be redirected away from the governments of those countries. In response, then Prime Minister and head of the Democratic Labour Party (DLP) Freundel Stuart took to the media to emphatically state that Barbados, being “a Christian country,” would not be dictated to by foreign powers such as the United Kingdom. Mr. Stuart then continued that the aggrieved provisions in the *Sexual Offences Act* were a necessary reflection of the country’s belief in the supremacy of God, and that doing away with those section would do more harm than good.

A similar line was used in 2014 when amendments were being considered for legislation protecting victims of domestic violence. Upon realizing that a gender-neutral law would likely benefit same-sex couples in abusive situations, the then Minister for Drainage and the Environment, Dr. Denis Lowe, emphatically stated that he would sooner resign from his post than allow it to pass. After a number of LGBTI advocates spoke out against Dr. Lowe’s statements, with some even suggesting that he should indeed resign, he held a press conference where he invoked his Christian beliefs, asserting that, like the colour of his skin, he could neither change or walk away from his beliefs, and insisted that he was being victimized by the LGBTI community. In 2015, when the amendments were passed, vestiges of the evangelical figment concerning a “Gay Agenda” reared its head when the former Minister for Youth, Culture and Sport, Dr. Esther Byer-Suckoo, warned against using the law to protect same-sex couples, advising that Barbados should be careful as “the agenda [in the legislation was] very strong.”

When the time came for the various political parties and candidates to start campaigning for the General Elections, the DLP made inferences that it was taking a religious hard line where the LGBTI community was concerned. The former Minister of Finance, Christopher Sinckler, declared that the campaign was going to be fought on a “platform of morals,” and threatened that, “who lives with who [was] going to come up,” implying that the sexual and romantic lives of high-profile individuals, even political opponents, were likely to be used as fodder to gain votes. Some days before Election Day, Dr. Lowe, the former Minister for the Environment and Drainage, took to the microphone at a crowded rally and shouted homophobic slurs about the LGBTI community and now Prime Minister, Mia Mottley, calling her a “self-confessed wicker”<sup>1</sup> and portraying a situation where, should Ms. Mottley come to power, her administration would legalize same-sex marriage, giving rise to “bullers marrying bullers and wickers marrying wickers.” Many DLP supporters took to the streets, plastering posters on telephone poles and highway lampposts and even bearing placards warning readers not to allow Ms. Mottley’s Barbados Labour Party (BLP) to come to power as this would spell certain moral decline for Barbados, a situation only the DLP was equipped to prevent.

In another incident, just weeks after the May 24th general elections that saw

the DLP lose to the BLP by a landslide, a calypso song entitled “Sex Change” made its debut on the radio. Written and performed by Paul “Billboard” Murrell, the song made many callous statements regarding the gender identities and expressions of trans people, focusing on crude references to the surgical procedures we may undergo during our medical transition. The song’s scathing refrain, “stop the disgrace, know your place and do not fly in God’s face,” was aired for a number of months and created some uproar amongst both religious sectors and LGBTI advocates alike, with the former siding with the song’s message, and the latter asking that it be pulled from the airwaves. Searches for the song online pointed to a YouTube video depicting a unisex bathroom symbol with the “No” symbol superimposed on it. The video description read, “God made man and woman. Anyone saying otherwise is madness!” When confronted by the media about the song, Mr. Murrell simply said that he was singing factually and that his religious beliefs inspired him to write the song, as he felt that trans identities and gender expressions went against God’s design.

Where the Church is concerned, I previously stated that I’ve found the evangelical community to be the most dangerous opponents of LGBTI equality in Barbados and the wider Caribbean. That is because I’ve witnessed, sometimes first-hand, the tactics that group has employed in response to LGBTI advocacy. In May 2015, I moderated a panel discussion entitled “When is Gay Too Gay, and Should We Try to Hide It?” This panel discussion was held at the University of the West Indies’ Law Faculty Moot Court, and was open to any individual who had an interest in attending. Panellists included my close friend, Attorney-at-Law Maurice Tomlinson; his husband, Capt. Rev. Thomas Decker (at that time, he was not yet a Captain); President of the National Organisation for Women, Ms. Nalita Gadjadhar; and Deputy Dean of Law, Attorney-at-Law Westmin James. The panel discussion went rather smoothly until we opened the discussion to question from the floor, at which point we noticed that a number of evangelical ministers and parishioners were in the audience. They immediately attempted to negate all of the discussions by repudiating Rev. Decker’s remarks in favour of the LGBTI community (and also as a gay man himself), Nalita’s unabashed support of the LGBTI community and how there was intersectionality between the LGBTI community and women’s rights, and Maurice and Westmin for supporting something illegal and punishable by life imprisonment (referring to the *Sexual Offences Act*). The remarks rose to such a point that not only did Nalita demand I bring order to the issue as she was tired of the religious community “hijacking panel discussion forums to preach and distract the conversation,” but I found myself calling for campus security and warning that further attempts to hijack the discussion or harass LGBTI people with religious comments would result in those individuals being removed from the Moot Court.

After these events, the president of Family, Faith, Freedom Barbados, Dr. Veronica Evelyn, wrote a stern letter to the editor, in which she not only fumed about being told to refrain from trying to proselytize her religious beliefs, but asserted that the panel discussion was an effort by a group of foreigners to impose same-sex marriage on Barbados, despite no such references ever being made during the discussion. I even found myself being plastered with the label of “foreigner,” which I presume was based on my German surname and the fact that I do not speak with the typical “Bajan” accent. Dr. Evelyn never got over this perceived slight, as she raised the issue again in another letter to the editor on August 4, 2019, this time accusing me, whom she now called “the sole Barbadian on the panel,” of instructing the panel not to entertain any questions of a religious nature. How ironic this behaviour would prove to be, as Dr. Evelyn, herself a foreign national, is also part of an evangelical group called “Caribbean Cause,” which only seems to have a voice when matters concerning the LGBTI community arise, and whose members reside in Jamaica, Belize, Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas, among other Caribbean territories.

During the summer of 2016, I was invited by a former friend to attend a panel discussion on the “Church and the LGBT Movement” at a Nazarene church. Curious to see how such a panel discussion would play out, I attended and found that the event was very carefully engineered. All of the panellists were evangelical ministers, and with the exception of myself, a few other well-known LGBTI advocates and some allies, all of the people in attendance were members of the ministers’ respective congregations.

Nearly all of the presentations given at the panel discussion were designed to portray the LGBTI community, its advocates, and allies as somehow a threat to society — the opening slide of one presentation, given by the Reverend Dr. Lucille Baird, depicted a group of people, all with angry facial expressions, and bearing various placards and flags relating to the LGBTI community. Dr. Baird went as far as to say that it was a deliberate choice for a person to be LGBTI, that it was a myth that heterosexual people can contract and pass on HIV, that any academic information that contradicted these ideas was in fact “bogus research” paid for by wealthy entities, and that there was an active “Gay Agenda,” part of which was to make all children LGBTI through indoctrination practices in schools and on television. Interestingly enough, Dr. Baird offered no references, even though she peppered her presentation with sporadic exclamations of “I know what I’m talking about, I’ve done my research!” The floor opened to nary a question except those from the LGBTI advocates and allies, and when I challenged the presentation’s assertions about sexuality, I was immediately rebuffed by a woman from Dr. Baird’s congregation, who, after going into her own story of being a “former lesbian,” insisted that my gender identity was the result of sexual abuse that she

was sure had happened, “even if [I can’t] remember it.” This is a tactic that I later realized is often used to convince people that the sexuality or gender identities of LGBTI people were somehow influenced by severe trauma. My other efforts to challenge the notion that LGBTI people deliberately choose their sexuality were met with dismissive groans from the congregation, who found the reality of a man or a woman not being sexually attracted by the opposite sex ridiculous.

I ultimately confronted Dr. Baird face-to-face at the end of the discussion and asked her to name her sources about there being a Gay Agenda and the idea of HIV transmission among heterosexuals being a myth. She again attempted her indignant response about having done her research, but when I asked to see the papers she had waved about earlier while making her assertions, I observed that her eyes widened almost in horror, as if she was realizing that she was going to be caught. When I further pointed out to her that heterosexual HIV transmission was in fact a very real thing, she attempted to screw up her face in scepticism. However when I mentioned the fact that many children have been diagnosed with HIV at birth, having contracted it from their mother in utero (which would often mean that the mother contracted it from a male partner), she became visibly uncomfortable. No sooner had I suggested that she contact the National HIV/AIDS Commission in order to get accurate information about HIV transmission, as well as take the time to interact with members of the LGBTI community outside of her congregation, Dr. Baird cut the conversation short, abruptly redirecting her attention to one of the other ministers from the panel and giving me the cold shoulder.

On November 9, 2019, Family, Faith, Freedom Barbados and Caribbean Cause came together to launch a public rally, entitled “Understand, then Take a Stand,” which lambasted a petition that I and two other Barbadian citizens made to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), and making references to other efforts throughout the region where LGBTI advocates initiated litigation, whether domestic or international, to decriminalize same-sex intimacy. A local attorney-at-law was even called in for the rally, and he engaged in a fiery tirade about how he believed the IACHR’s Court counterpart was “out of order” for supporting LGBTI equality, even though my petition had yet to get a response from the Government of Barbados or even have a hearing date scheduled, more than a year after it was first filed. Other panellists went as far as insisting that the IACHR was a United States-based organization, even though anyone familiar with the American Convention on Human Rights and the Organization of American States (OAS) would find that the “American” nomenclature is a geographical reference as opposed to a national one.

One other speaker spent a few minutes on how the two organizations were rising up against concerning developments in the United States and parts of Europe, where, according to them, Christian employees could find themselves denied



housing, mired in lawsuits and dismissed from work because their “difference of opinion” was labelled as hate speech and bigotry. The reality is that when individuals face such professional adversity, legal conflict, or domestic crises, it is almost always because of their own unnecessarily discriminatory practices, even verbal harassment meted out to members of the LGBTI community — ironically the same problems inflicted upon the LGBTI community, which evangelical groups claim to be worried about happening to them. Dr. Evelyn herself gave a speech appealing to the Government of Barbados to either ignore my petition altogether, argue stridently against it, or even ignore or appeal “any” decisions arising from the IACHR or any other judicial body that hears similar cases to my petition. In her speech, she revealed that she was certain my petition would be successful, and accused the IACHR and other courts that have ruled in favour of LGBTI people of “judicial activism.” She then introduced Jamaican LGBTI opponent Dr. Wayne West, who, in his speech, also slammed the IACHR for entertaining my petition and for its Advisory Opinions regarding same-sex marriage and affirming the right of LGBTI people not to be discriminated against on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender identity. He even played back a number of video clips featuring members of the IACHR who made statements affirming the rights and freedoms of minorities, and despite their clear statements and explanations, told the crowd that the statements made in the video meant something completely different. He then shifted the subject to how laws such as Barbados’ *Sexual Offences Act* were necessary as a matter of public health and safety, going into theories linking the declassification of homosexuality as a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association to the advent of the HIV and AIDS crisis, and scatological details claiming that certain bacteria in the rectum caused HIV, that engagement in anal intercourse invariably resulted in bowel incontinence, and that health agencies all over the world were dealing with exceptionally high cases of HIV among homosexual men compared to heterosexual men, but deliberately under-reported their figures due to strong-armed tactics by LGBTI advocates.

Even this year, evangelical sectors continue to misrepresent the fight for LGBTI equality and inclusion and position the issue as one that is to be of great worry for Christian-minded people. In Belize, years after striking down section 53 of its Penal Code and declaring any laws criminalizing same-sex intimacy as unconstitutional, work is now underway to enact legislation intended to provide equal opportunities to all members of society, including the LGBTI community. The Equal Opportunities Bill seeks to prohibit discrimination in employment, housing, healthcare, access to justice and various other aspects of society on the basis of a person’s sexual orientation and gender identity, among other protected characteristics. Unfortunately, Caribbean Cause and other evangelical groups have attempted to misrepresent the Bill and any other similar legislation as be-

ing a threat to Christian life, implying that, should the laws come into effect, Churches may find themselves being disbanded and members arrested for practicing religion in their homes. Some government organizations even considered not supporting the legislation out of fear that the focus on LGBTI issues by the evangelical sector would tarnish them. However, after some local and regional advocates and organizations issued public statements in support of the Bill, organizations such as the National AIDS Commission assisted in clearing the air and assuring citizens that the Bill protected all citizens, including Christians who wish to share their beliefs with others.

Amidst all of the havoc wreaked by the evangelical community and other like-minded religious sects and followers in the Caribbean, one cannot help but observe that a much simpler effort has been foregone — the effort of simply placing oneself in another’s shoes and realizing the importance of treating others with genuine love, compassion and kindness. When a religious group calls for laws criminalizing a group of otherwise law-abiding people for what they do consensually and in private to either be placed on the books or retained, there is a lack of love and compassion for a fellow human being and, most regrettably, a clear sense of regression. That one can call for a situation where a person might face life in prison, yet dread the possibility of being sued by that person, or even fear suspension or dismissal after being held to account for treating that person unfairly is a severely ironic scenario.

Religious leaders, and by extension, the Church as an umbrella, have spent many years teaching us, from the time we were small children, how to love one another — even drilling the Golden Rule into our minds, to “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” It seems that at some point, many of us have conveniently dispensed of the Golden Rule and replaced it with a rule to visit harm on those we do not understand, yet insist that such detriment never befalls us. Such is this erosion of an age-old teaching that, even when members of the Church and the wider society extend an olive branch, a helping hand, or even a pair of outstretched arms to the LGBTI community, to view us through eyes of love, to think of us with a mind of kindness and hold us in compassion-filled hearts, many choose to view this gesture with sheer contempt and open repudiation. These same individuals who repudiate the idea of unconditionally loving, accepting and embracing members of a community who are routinely marginalized seem to take solace in reinforcing that very marginalization. They, like the evangelical leaders, satiate themselves by spreading statements, even blatant falsehoods, that negatively portray the LGBTI community and offer some justification for their poor treatment.

Regrettably, those who taught us in the beginning to treat others the way we wish to be treated have somehow either lost their voice or otherwise found them-

selves unable to get that original message to stick once again. I sincerely hope that the time will come when these evangelical minds, which so ardently seek to erase the existence of a group of people who have caused them no harm, come to understand that the life we seek, the privileges and freedoms we hope to enjoy, are no more than what they have taken for granted, and that the lessons of love and compassion first learned when we were all children become an old habit, virtually indestructible and simply unforgettable.

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<sup>1</sup> “Wicker” and “buller” are derogatory terms used in Barbados and other parts of the Caribbean to refer to lesbians and gay men respectively.

# **Sex and Sexuality, Particularly Homosexuality, in Relation to the Christian Church and the Evangelical Traditions in the Caribbean**

*George Garwood*

Bearing in mind the interference and destructive developments of COVID-19, we recognize that life must go on. And this life, includes discussions and decisions about justice: including not only Black Lives Matter, civil rights, and human rights, but also many other kinds of rights.

But the rights I am to talk to you about today are still the pressing and insistent ones about gay and lesbian relationships. Such rights, although they seem to have taken a backseat to the pandemic that rages, are still never far away from our personal and corporate consciousness; and such rights, or denial of these rights, affect all of us.

So let us briefly look at the LGBTQ+ landscape. On September 15, 2020, a Barbadian newspaper (*Barbados Today*) reported that the government of Barbados revealed that it is prepared to “recognise a form of civil union for couples of the same gender” to ensure that no human being in Barbados will be discriminated against in exercising civil rights that ought to be theirs.

But there was a stipulation that the government would accept and be guided by the vote of the public. In other words, a referendum will be held on this proposal. But this referendum itself poses a problem: what if the referendum goes against human rights principles and the right to live without discrimination? What then does the government do based on its stated intentions below?

One of the reasons the government gave for being willing to accept civil unions for same sex couples is that “legal systems of modern societies recognise many different forms of human relationships and Barbados was now ‘increasingly finding itself on international lists,’ including within the multilateral system, which identify the country as having a poor human rights record.”

However, the government recognized that such a plan “will attract controversy. Equally, it is our hope that with the passage of time, the changes we now propose will be part of the fabric of our country’s record of law, human rights and social justice.”

So the government of Barbados says it recognizes many different forms of human relationships and wants to designate certain legal and political legitimacy to such forms of human relationships — in this case, to civil same-sex relationships.

Now, a significant section of Barbados that prides itself in being very religious has forcibly come out against the intentions of the government to recognize civil same-sex relationships.

So, for instance, the Anglican Bishop of Barbados, Reverend Michael Maxwell is adamant that while his denomination understands that the government's recent recognition of same-sex civil unions may be a stance against discrimination, gay relationships still would not be backed by his church.

The bishop goes on to say that the Anglican Church in Barbados and the rest of the Province of the West Indies remained fortified in its position stemming from a decision of the 1998 Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops in England that marriage is a lifelong union of a man and a woman. "[W]e continue to follow what is the ruling of our Lambeth Conference which is a conference that is held by all of the bishops of the world coming together. They would have made a statement abiding by the principles that we understand Scripture outlined to us of the fact that a marriage is really between a male and a female. It is the best arrangement towards family life," Reverend Maxwell declared in another *Barbados Today* article.

"Barbados is on the wrong road," say Jamaican church leaders. So the president of the Jamaica Association of Evangelicals (JAE), Dr. Peter Garth, speaking to the *Jamaica Observer*, says:

*"While there are some issues that there is a divide when it comes to the Jamaica Evangelical Alliance, I can speak clearly and loudly regarding the position of the evangelicals [on this issue]. We hold to the biblical position, morality does not evolve, and three thousand years from now, if the Lord tarries, we will have the same position."*

Likewise, the chair of the Jamaica Pentecostal Union Apostolic (JPUA), Reverend Major Canute Chambers, speaking on the matter, said, the JPUA was unwavering in its stance: "To any well-thinking servant of God who believes the word of God and stands by it, homosexuality is not an option. It is something that is abhorred. [...] But as for me, and I believe I speak for the entire JPUA, we are completely against same sex marriages or unions of any kind," he told the *Observer*.

But a minority of other people in Barbados are supportive of the government's move. In an online comment responding to the *Barbados Today* article, one person declares: "We must remember that Barbados is a SECULAR country NOT a THEOCRACY. Our state apparatus does not align itself to any particular religious group."

Another supporter responding to the same article exults: "Congratulations! Barbados is finally coming into modern times. LGBTQ persons are humankind too. Discrimination against others is unacceptable. Hypocrisy is rife in Barbados. As your bible states: 'Let him without sin, cast the first stone.'"

However, in the main, more people disagreed with, and were hostile to, the government's proposals to recognize same-sex unions than were for it. Not surprisingly, the dissenters usually quoted the Bible or gave religious reasons for denouncing the government's attempt to bring about civil unions between same-sex couples.

These are the same kind of theological arguments that have been advanced by many in mainline Christianity to denounce and even criminalize homosexual activities between consenting adults. This homosexual opposition is seen in not only Barbados, but also the wider Christian and non-Christian communities throughout the Caribbean.

However, despite the Evangelical churches' and other conservative Christian organizations' enmity towards the LGBTQ+ community, legal measures are taking place or under consideration to decriminalize or make less onerous the numerous burdens placed on the homosexual community.

For instance, in 2018, a Trinidad and Tobago judge ruled that homophobic laws were unconstitutional. This ruling, which declared sections of the *Sexual Offences Act* unconstitutional, may soon lead to decriminalizing gay sex. The High Court issued a final ruling, repealing sections 13 and 16 of the *Sexual Offences Act*, which criminalized gay sex between consenting adults.

Also, in Belize, same-sex sexual activity was illegal until 2016, when the Supreme Court declared Belize's anti-sodomy law unconstitutional.

On December 30, 2019, in *Caleb Orozco v. Attorney General of Belize*, the Belize Court of Appeal upheld the earlier 2016 decision of the Chief Justice of Belize, finding the criminalization of homosexual conduct to breach the prohibition on sex discrimination set out in the Constitution of Belize.

This ruling represented a major victory for LGBTQ+ persons in the Caribbean. The Court also held that such criminalization breached the right to freedom of expression enjoyed by all LGBTQ+ persons and endorsed the earlier findings of the Chief Justice that criminalization violated the rights to privacy, dignity and equality before the law, all protected by the Constitution.

Although many conservative Caribbean religious leaders and conservative legislators are hostile to homosexuality and same-sex marriages (as are some of their fundamentalist counterparts in many other non-Caribbean countries), a considerable number of Christian denominations are now open to accepting LGBTQ+ practitioners.

For the thesis of my original speech, which was that gay rights are indistinguishable from civil and human rights, I posed the following questions: Who is it to decide and determine our sexual orientation or preferences? Is it the church, the government or some other impersonal or coercive entity? Or is it we, who are the sole agents of our bodies?

I went on to suggest that in our time and in our cultures, there was a time (and still is) when skin colour, certain physical or mental disabilities, or gender differences were (and still are) used as tools to exclude people from the general society; for instance, denying them voting rights, equal opportunities in housing, employment and so forth. But still in several Western cultures and non-Western societies, and sadly in many Caribbean churches, discrimination and animosity remain towards the LGBTQ+ community.

So same-sex relationships, including marriages, between consenting adults cannot be categorized as a crime like rape, incest or such other acts of sexual or predatory violence against the individual. The time has long gone, whether we like it or not, to recognize the wide spectrum of sexuality and gender identities that exist.

I conclude my discussion by saying that there are evident evolutionary reasons for sexuality in both the human and animal species. Sex and sexuality are complex existential human behaviours — I dare say, even God-given ones.

So, in the final analysis, nature ensures a sustainable and equilibrrious world through sex and sexuality, including bisexuality, homosexuality and heterosexuality.

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# **The Long Road from Decriminalization to Equal Marriage: Civil and Religious Activism for LGBTI+ Rights in Mexico**

*Carlos Navarro Fernández*

## **The Decriminalization of Same-Sex Activity: A Liberal Victory**

When we Mexicans busy ourselves with armed internal conflict, we usually wrap it up by means of a new Constitution — so it was in 1824, after gaining independence from Spain. We did it again in 1857, once the War of Reform was done with, and we sure repeated the whole process in 1917, as the Mexican Revolution claimed victory and established the new regime and laws that rule us to this day.

Let us set our eyes on the Constitution of 1857, which was the starting point of the War of Reform. This was a conflict by which liberal and conservative forces clashed to determine how much power the Roman Catholic Church should wield within the Mexican political system. After three years of bloody battles, the liberals were victorious in 1860 and confirmed the establishment of a republican political system that decidedly separated the state from the church. It was quite an achievement, as many other countries around the world know too well. Throughout Mexican history after independence, the Roman Catholic Church has truly been a force to reckon with.

The dominance that the Roman Catholic Church exercised for centuries in Mexico is no surprise when we consider 300 years of Spanish colonial rule. Spain's domination over Mexico, and most of the rest of Latin America, came “with the sword and with the cross,” as historians now put it. In the mid-nineteenth century, the victorious liberals sought a modern, civil, lay state for all Mexicans to benefit from. Before the War of Reform, the former New Spain was practically a theocracy. New parents did not go to city hall to get a birth certificate; they went to the local parish to get a baptismal registry. No Mexican before 1860 could go to a bank to request a loan; it was the local church that provided those. And, of course, when the time came to get married, it was the Catholic clergy who, in God's name and under his authority, approved of and licensed the life you would hence lead with your new spouse forever thereafter. So it was with most “public affairs” for Mexicans for many decades, even well into the twentieth century.

Next time you visit Mexico City and stroll down its famous Promenade of the Reform — the main thoroughfare on which major hotels, monuments, embassies, museums and the financial district are located — look closely at each of the many bronze statues that line its sides. Each one of those liberal individuals played a



role in bringing relevant freedoms to the citizens of the country. Mexicans hold a debt of gratitude to each one of them.

I bring up this short period in Mexican history, and its immediate results, simply because it is the one that opened the doors for the Congress of the country to decriminalize same-sex activity in 1871.<sup>1</sup> Never since has there been any further debate in Mexican law, or in its political processes, as to whether consensual same-sex activity between adults should be considered a crime or outlawed in any form. The Constitution of 1917 added much-demanded social justice articles but never touched on this issue.

This is also a good story to discover why Mexico is known to be a country with excellent legislation, with very modern and progressive laws in its books, but which often suffers from poor implementation and haphazard enforcement. While still viewed mostly from a liberal-conservative perspective of opposition — with much discrimination and ignorance in the mix — the issue of same-sex activity, and of equality for LGBTI+ individuals, would not strongly reappear in the country's political debate for at least 100 years.

### **The Long Road to Marriage Equality in Mexico**

*“Even cockroaches were given family rank now because they live under the same roof; if a cat, a dog, two lesbians and the rest live together, it’s a family.”*

—Mexican Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragán, Vatican health minister, October 2004<sup>2</sup>

The walk of a few blocks that my husband, Eduardo, and I took down to the local civil court to get a marriage licence, on November 25, 2010, in the Mexico City Roma neighbourhood where we lived, seemed easy and short enough. It was similar to what heterosexual couples have done for centuries, in hundreds of countries, under various political regimes and religious establishments. For us, that event 10 years ago had never really been in our plans. By the time we faced the judge and signed the official documents we had been together for almost 14 years, and it had never occurred to us to, well, stand before a judge to get married. That was not something homosexual couples in Mexico did or planned for. Even so, the ink on the Mexico City law that had permitted such a happening to occur had barely dried and here we were, holding hands and saying, “I do.” The 75-year-old presiding judge, whom we met only a few minutes before the ceremony, was exceptional. “I have only three recommendations to give to you,” he said solemnly. “Love, love, and more love. That is all you will need for this marriage to be successful.”

Our story is very different from those of some other LGBTI+ couples who have told us how — under the same law — they were forced to stand before a

Mexico City judge who proclaimed hither and thither: “Let it be known that I am only presiding over this ceremony because the law so dictates. Let it be clear, also, that I do not agree with it in the least.” And from there started an awkward formality that left no one truly satisfied and that unfairly tainted a marriage just begun. These sad occurrences still take place in cities across the many states that have now legalized equal marriage in their jurisdictions.

Now, don’t get me wrong, we are not yet in paradise, and not everything started in 2009 with the passage of this Mexico City law. The LGBTI+ movement has been alive and well for many decades in my country. In fact, just a few months before Eduardo and I walked down the aisle in 2010, Mexico City held its 32nd annual Pride parade. At the time of the first such parade, in 1979, getting rights in place for LGBTI+ individuals, including equal marriage, seemed attainable in the distant future; however, achieving that goal would still take a lot of time, much struggle, and plenty of tears.

By the time our wedding ceremony was over, and it was time to eat and drink and celebrate, we made it a point to lift our glasses and propose a toast to honour all those brave Mexicans who marched, raised their voices, and openly showed their faces to pressure the Mexico City Legislative Assembly to pass an equal marriage bill. We were fully conscious that had it not been for their efforts, of which we were never a part, we would not be officially joining our lives before the authorities of our country’s most important city. It was a toast of gratitude that made me realize that we must all contribute; we must not remain silent. When setting my eyes on our brand-new marriage licence, I confirmed that we are all called to speak up courageously to truly make a difference, wherever in the world we may happen to reside.

This sudden discovery has taken me to roads of activism that I was, again, not planning on. One has been in government, the other within the Roman Catholic Church itself. They have both been challenging but they have also provided me with rewarding experiences and immeasurable personal growth. In both, I have also had the opportunity to contemplate up close the larger-than-life influence of the Roman Catholic Church in my country, War of Reform notwithstanding. Let me share them with you some aspects of this activism.

### **A Tale of Two Presidents**

*“Why does the church oppose the president’s bill that promotes equal marriage? The human body is not designed for homosexual relationships. Women have a cavity specially prepared for sexual intercourse that is lubricated to facilitate penetration, to resist friction, to secrete substances that protect the female body from possible semen infections. But the man’s anus is not*

*designed to receive, only to expel; its membrane is delicate, it tears easily, and lacks protection against external agents that could infect it. The member that penetrates the anus injures it severely and can cause bleeding and infections.”*

—Norberto Rivera, Cardinal and former Archbishop of Mexico<sup>3</sup>

The bill approved by the Mexico City Legislative Assembly in 2009 legalizing equal marriage in the capital city was bound to be controversial and bitterly opposed. Such a piece of legislation could not survive in this mostly Catholic country, right? In fact, Mexico is the second-largest Catholic country on earth, behind only Brazil. What were those leftist local legislators up to? President Felipe Calderón was not happy. This right-wing president — and the many Catholic conservatives who supported his administration — would have none of it. The leftist-leaning progressives infecting the Mexico City government would undoubtedly be defeated. So what better option than to call on the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation to rule on this most unpleasant new piece of legislation? Surely they were wise enough to know the difference and uphold the family values that a majority of Mexicans held dear. The president ordered his legal counsel and the country’s attorney general to draft and file a lawsuit before the Supreme Court arguing that the said local law was unconstitutional. He expected no less than an easy, prompt majority ruling in his favour.

God undoubtedly has her ways. Her instruments and her means of bringing about justice and a piece of her realm are often odd, unexpected, and difficult to understand. “It’s complicated!” as we now often affirm in many a social media post. It would be through this presidential lawsuit that the Mexican Supreme Court would not only eventually rule that the new equal marriage legislation passed by the Mexico City Legislative Assembly was fully constitutional but also order all other states in the country to amend their civil codes to effectively grant the right of marriage to any two citizens, regardless of their gender or sexual orientation. The ruling was clearly not in favour of the former president or his coalition. What has followed has been the slow process by which each state will amend its own civil code to allow equal marriage. It has been a long, tortuous road with many LGBTI+ people having to sue state governments to finally be able to marry. As of December 2019, out of the 32 Mexican states, 17 now allow equal marriage within their jurisdictions, 12 of those through updated laws, and five by way of civil lawsuits that are promptly resolved in their favour.<sup>4</sup>

More at the centre of the political spectrum, President Enrique Peña viewed these social issues very differently from his predecessor. Because states were dragging their feet updating their civil codes to allow for equal marriage — often claiming that the marriage forms could not so easily be rewritten to eliminate “his” or “her” — he believed the country was ready for a federal bill that would

legalize it all over Mexico. I had a privileged and up-close view of this process and of this presidential decision. In December 2012, in one of those unexpected turns in life, I was invited to work for this newly elected president of Mexico. I thus became a political and media advisor to his chief of staff.

My job consisted mostly of analyzing current public policy and making suggestions on how it could be improved. The chief of staff read my work and discussed it with me before walking into the president's office, only a few feet away, to see what he had to say about the new proposals. If we were lucky, the head of state would instruct some cabinet member or other top official to have them implemented, or perhaps expanded on and improved, and then executed. I will not bore you with the details of everything I did there, but there is one proposal I am particularly proud of. It consisted of inviting LGBTI+ leaders and activists to the presidential residence to show the government's support for their work and to discuss with them how public policy regarding equality could be improved. It took a whole year for this idea to be brought about, a proposition that had not only been well received by the president but to which he had also added a lot of his own. In the end, President Peña would not only welcome dozens of LGBTI+ leaders from all over the country to his official residence but also send a new bill to Congress, asking the federal legislature to make equal marriage a valid right in all 32 states. Our excitement on this unexpected result would not last as the Mexican Congress soon refused to pass the new law that the president had sent. As the graphic quote I give you above from Cardinal Rivera clearly shows, powerful religious forces were behind the opposition to such a novel, national piece of legislation. This time, unlike in Mexico City in 2009, they were strong enough to prevent federal deputies from even putting the bill up for discussion on the floor, much less getting it to a plenary vote.

Many months later, in fact only a few weeks before the Peña administration would come to a close, in December 2018, my former boss, still the president's chief of staff at the time, came to my new hometown of Puerto Vallarta, so I suggested we meet for a drink and conversation at the port city's beautiful boardwalk. "That was such a great move, to send a formal bill to Congress," I told him. "Wish it had been taken up by the Congress." His response left me quite surprised, not pleasantly. "All those LGBTI+ activists let us down," he said looking me in the eye. "They should have marched on the streets in every state capital, called lawmakers, published articles, spoken before crowds, made a fuss to have that bill passed." After an uncomfortable silence, he added, "All they wanted was a photo op with the president, not a federal equal marriage law."

Sure, we will forever claim that the "dark forces" of Catholic and Evangelical conservatism did away with that shining hope of a legislative bill. But part of the truth is that we need to come out and speak up, let our representatives know that

this is what an important part of Mexican society desires and would be happy to see in the books. In the opinion of this former top official, there is only so much a presidential bill sent to the Legislative Branch can do, “in this new democratic Mexico,” if LGBTI+ crowds fail to act and flood the halls of Congress with demands, arguments and undeniable public support. If they refuse to show up in the public arena, show their faces and make their voices heard, fearful and often ignorant legislators will not open their ears and their hearts. These same activists had, however, showed their ability to do exactly that eight years before at the Mexico City Legislative Assembly.

I tell you the story in this close-up fashion because I believe it is important to seize opportunities and do the hard work that it takes for government, or church, to act. Once we start shaking things up, as I myself did in the high echelons of the Mexican government, we must be ready to decidedly stand behind whatever positive, encouraging decisions are made.

### **LGBTI+ Catholic Leadership**

*“Gay people have the right to live as they want, to choose what they want, and the government can give them a statute, some legal form for their association. But they have no right to aspire to marriage, because marriage is something else; it is the union between a man and a woman.”*

—Juan Sandoval Iniguez, Cardinal and former Archbishop of Guadalajara, Mexico<sup>5</sup>

All of these events did not sit well with the ultra-conservative “leaders” of the Roman Catholic Church in Mexico. The “loving arguments” they used to oppose the 2016 presidential bill to legalize equal marriage nationally were very old-fashioned, to say the least. Their descriptions also attempted to describe me, my husband and many a close friend as well as the hundreds of committed LGBTI+ Catholics I have had the honour of meeting from Tijuana to Cozumel, from the Pacific coast to the Gulf of Mexico.

Whenever an LGBTI+ activist asks me why in the world I remain in the Catholic Church, I can’t help but describe the many amazing feats of love that this religious organization is capable of pulling off. I affirm this so unequivocally because I have seen this myself quite often. The lonely parish priest pressuring a local government to make sure the vaccination corps arrive to his impoverished municipality. The sense of solidarity and unity that a community gets from the leadership of a young seminarian who is there not only to give out the sacraments but also to speak to the people, to listen to their concerns, to work together — in companionship — to make their material lives a little better. And, of course, the Roman Catholic friar who offers a vision of Christian hope and meaning to a

flock that is often confused and offended by the awful events of our world. Their voices and their testimonies are what keeps me believing in the Catholic Church; it is also what many LGBTI+ Catholics treasure and that feeds their desire to continue working in unison, as true Catholics.

You will hardly ever hear about any of this on the news or in social media. There, it is all about pedophilia and the wealth and mismanagement of the Catholic hierarchy. However, I have seen the powerful potential for good that my church holds, and I have seen her in action, improving lives and expanding spiritual horizons that effectively build the Kingdom of Heaven down here on earth. Believe it or not, there are indeed parts of the Catholic Church that have not forgotten the message of Jesus.

This is exactly the company we want to keep as LGBTI+ Catholics, a true spiritual community to aspire to. It is something that I have also seen with my own eyes all across my country and, in fact, in many parts of Latin America. I speak to you as co-chair of the Mexico Network of Rainbow Catholics. Ours is an organization designed to summon all of Mexico's LGBTI+ Catholic groups in order to achieve full religious and social integration through a renewed Catholic Church.<sup>6</sup> Just like Saint Francis in his day — and please notice that the name taken by our current Pope appears to be no coincidence — we do not want a new Church; we want a significant improvement over the one we already have. Francis went before Pope Innocent III and told him that the Church's ways had to change, that God did not like the way things were going and that the hierarchy had stepped away from Jesus's teachings. We like our Church, we cherish its sacraments, but we do believe some of its teachings, its moral guidance, must be updated and amended. As was the case when I worked for big government, I know that when Catholic leaders set out to do good, they can do so outstandingly well. And, as it happens, by virtue of our common baptism, we are indeed LGBTI+ Catholic leaders. We are rainbow Catholics, and we intend to lovingly and purposefully tell our brothers and sisters in our small praying communities, in our local parishes, in the big dioceses and even bigger archdioceses and, well, in the Vatican itself, that we wish for a different Church. We are, however, already building a new Catholic community from the grassroots: it is a voice that is now being heard and that has produced bountiful fruit, as Galatians would have it, of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."<sup>7</sup>

### **A Growing, Well-Financed Challenge from Evangelicals**

I will discuss the apparently undeterred expansion of Evangelicals in Mexico by sharing with you two stories. One has to do with a fellow LGBTI+ activist; the other with a friend who left the Catholic Church to join an Evangelical organization.

Let's start with the latter. Jesús liked his divine namesake very much, but the way he was being treated by his Catholic community did not sit well with him. As with many young Catholics, he saw the happy singing, the get-togethers, the social work that this Evangelical church did in his city and came to like it. They all seemed so relaxed and informal. Back in his old church, it was all silence, incense and a little too much respect. Even though the Evangelical churches have not expanded as much in Mexico as they have done in Central and South America, they do have a strong following, particularly in the poorer, southern part of the country. There is no doubt that they are well-funded, mostly from organizations in the United States. However, hearing Jesús tell me about his experience, I concluded that Evangelicals are even more prone to discriminate against LGBTI+ individuals than the Catholic Church itself. Lesson learned. Jesús decided to leave the Evangelical church, but he never quite made it back to his old Catholic circle. This is the often repeated and sad story of an LGBTI+ person wishing to join a Christian community but finding that they can only do so if they hide and remain mostly quiet. In these Evangelical groups, many Mexicans find not only a different way of worship but also often material and financial support. The Catholic Church in Mexico appears to be losing members not to atheism or agnosticism but to Protestant denominations, only more slowly than many thought. This is not the case, however, in countries like Uruguay, where a large percentage of the population wants nothing to do with Christianity or its institutions.<sup>8</sup>

The second story regarding Evangelicals comes from a good friend of mine, an LGBTI+ activist who holds no religious convictions. When we LGBTI+ Catholics speak to fellow activists about our dream of equal Church membership, about our desire to walk into a Catholic Church by the hand of our partners and spouses “just like everyone else” and about the hard work we are already doing to get there, we often get asked the same disbelieving questions and hear similar complaints: “Why are you even still there?” “Why are you in an institution that denies your very identity?” “You are wasting your time and everyone’s efforts in dealing with the Roman Catholic Church! Stop already!” Fair enough. However, though we understand the reclamations, I must say that when we calmly and uncomplainingly explain what is behind our efforts, how relevant our Catholic spirituality is for us and how unfair it is for LGBTI+ people to give it up because of who they are, most of these activists “get it” and understand that we all have our issues, our priorities, our lives. This was the case with a good friend of mine, a “high-ranking LGBTI+ activist” in Mexico City, who happened to be close to the president in that now-famous photograph of LGBTI+ leaders at the official residence. Enrique had the patience to hear me out and “got it.” This is not about converting activists to Catholicism; it is about working together for common, transcendent goals that add value to Mexican society. It is our hope that the many

other LGBTI+ Catholic movements we know of around the world will also seek to speak to other activists, join hands and bring about justice to all regardless of whether they go to Mass every Sunday or not.

So it was that I was talking to Enrique a couple of years ago about a bus campaign that an organization had set out “to protect the Mexican family” and oppose gay marriage and, particularly, the adoption of children by LGBTI+ couples (do remember the above story about a presidential bill; no coincidence here either). The “orange bus” would travel the country to proclaim to everyone that the Mexican family would not be destroyed by “a minority of homosexuals.”

“I hear there are Catholic organizations backing this bus tour,” I told him. “Well, yes,” he said. “But we activists are not so much concerned with Catholic opposition to gay marriage as much as Evangelicals. They have the means, the will and the time to do all this. They are a true force we must deal with, much more so than any of our Mexican Catholic organizations,” he concluded. This is how I obtained first-hand evidence of the will of Evangelicals to deny LGBTI+ Mexicans the right to equal marriage and the adoption of children. They had been defeated in Mexico City back in 2009, and they would not see that happen again at the national level. And they didn’t. As I have made it very clear, the Congress would not even put President Peña’s bill on the floor. For the record, Catholic institutions did join the bus campaign strongly and loudly, but the biggest effort really came from the logistical abilities and the strong funding that came from Evangelicals. Ireland would envy the way Catholics and Protestants joined efforts in their drive to fight LGBTI+ rights in Mexico.

### **An Evolving Roman Catholic Church**

I hope I have been able to present a panorama of the situation of LGBTI+ rights in Mexico and of how the Catholic Church still plays a role in denying them. But not all is lost. Parts of the Church in my country are opening up, holding on to every word of tolerance Pope Francis pronounces, and not only welcoming us to their communities but engaging in active, positive dialogue.

As for the rest of Latin America, the situation is quite similar in a largely Catholic subcontinent. With a few exceptions, such as Argentina and Uruguay, we are mostly struggling with the same issues and the same old-fashioned thinking of Catholic doctrine from Mexicali to Bariloche. I often talk to LGBTI+ Catholic leaders in many of those countries. Hope is in the air. Our Church is starting to realize that we are an asset, not an enemy. That we are here not to destroy our religious institution but to rebuild it and expand it in a renewed fashion. It is our constant prayer to God that she will be there to help us start this challenging, hopeful transformation. We may not be around to see it completed, but we certainly are ready to lay down strong, durable foundations.



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- <sup>1</sup> Senate of the Republic of Mexico, *Los derechos de las personas LGBTI en el mundo y la situación en México* (LGBTI rights around the world and the situation in Mexico) (Mexico City: Centro de Estudios Internacionales Gilberto Bosques, June 7, 2016). Available via <https://centrogilbertobosques.senado.gob.mx/analisisinvestigacion/contexto/di-070616-lgbti>.
- <sup>2</sup> D. Miklos, “Blattángelus: Un documental iluminado” (Blattángelus: An Illuminated Documentary), *Nexos* magazine, October 1, 2010.
- <sup>3</sup> J. Brandoli, “La Iglesia mexicana en lucha contra los matrimonios y adopciones gay” (The Mexican Church Fights Gay Marriage, Adoptions), *El Mundo*, September 13, 2016.
- <sup>4</sup> National Council to Prevent Discrimination (CONAPRED), “Matrimonio igualitario, a 10 años de su aprobación en la Ciudad de México” (Equal Marriage, 10 Years After Its Approval in Mexico City), news bulletin 2019-140, December 21, 2019.
- <sup>5</sup> A. Rivera, “Matrimonios gay, minorías en contra de mayoría: Sandoval Íñiguez” (Gay marriages, minorities against the majority: Sandoval Íñiguez), *El Universal*, May 30, 2016.
- <sup>6</sup> Mexico Network of Rainbow Catholics, “Our Goal.” Available at <https://en.catolicosarcoiris.mx/objetivo>.
- <sup>7</sup> Galatians 5:22–23 (Revised Standard Version).
- <sup>8</sup> J. Corrales, *LGBT Rights and Representation in Latin America and the Caribbean: The Influence of Structure, Movements, Institutions, and Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2015). Available at [https://globalstudies.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/224/2015/04/LGBT\\_Report\\_LatAm\\_v8-copy.pdf](https://globalstudies.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/224/2015/04/LGBT_Report_LatAm_v8-copy.pdf).

# Church and Decriminalization in Latin America

*Jim Hodgson*

For almost 40 years, my work has taken me back and forth between Canada, Latin America and the Caribbean. I lived in the Dominican Republic in the late 1980s and in Mexico in the late 1990s.

But I am not Latin American, just a close friend and chosen-family member.

As such — and conscious of the manifold ways that Christians from the Global North caused many of the problems that we contend with in this conference — I will focus on the ways that people of faith can either help or hinder the struggle for LGBTI rights and inclusion.

I will begin by sharing something of how The United Church of Canada took its relatively progressive history in Canada on LGBTI rights and inclusion into conversations with global partners. Canada decriminalized sexual activity between adults of the same sex in 1969, but discrimination persisted. The United Church began to defend the human rights of sexual minorities in the 1970s. It resolved in 1988 to end barriers to membership and ministry of gay men and lesbians. It decided in favour of equal marriage in 2003. A series of decisions a decade ago welcomed trans people into full participation.<sup>1</sup>

In the past 15 years, we deepened conversations among churches and social movements for LGBTI rights and inclusion. A series of consultations helped to ensure that we were working in ways that placed partners and their contexts at the heart of the conversation, always inviting and trying not to impose. In 2019, a Latin America regional consultation was held at the Reformed University Corporation in Barranquilla, Colombia. What I share today draws from that event.

Most of us in the Americas live with legal frameworks imposed during the colonial era.<sup>2</sup> In Latin America, same-sex activity and diverse gender identities weren't so much criminalized as persecuted.<sup>3</sup> A key issue for LGBTI people in recent decades has been to end persecution by opening public space and increasing legal protection. Progress has been made, but extreme levels of violence persist.

Our consultation in Barranquilla was grounded in Colombia's struggle for peace with social justice. In the past two decades, the late stages of a 60-year civil war, I came to know people in the municipality of San Onofre, which is close to the Caribbean Sea, a three-hour drive from Cartagena. The worst of the violence perpetrated by paramilitary death squads had eased by the time of my first visit to the area in 2006. I travelled with leaders of Colombia's Methodist Church who had accompanied local communities of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous peoples through the bad years.

In 2015, Colombia's National Centre for Historical Memory published

its report<sup>4</sup> on violence against LGBTI people during the civil war. The section on what happened in San Onofre, where young gay men and trans women were forced into boxing matches and publicly humiliated for the pleasure of the paramilitaries, gives urgency to my words to you today.

Across Latin America, with regard to LGBTI rights and inclusion, you find a panorama of contradictions. While the region has high levels of violence directed at LGBTI people, it now has some of the world's more progressive laws for protection and equality. Most countries ban overt discrimination, and transgender persons can change their legal gender and name without surgery or judicial order. Some countries ban "conversion therapy." Same-sex marriage is more frequently celebrated, in part due to the decision in January 2018 of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights,<sup>5</sup> but especially because of advocacy carried forward by activists and their excellent lawyers over many years.

But these gains coexist with violence and restrictions on access to rights. Because of bullying, the LGBTI population tends to abandon the education system early. LGBTI people suffer discrimination in access to housing and health services and have fewer job opportunities.

Every day, four LGBTI people are murdered in Latin America and the Caribbean.<sup>6</sup> In 2018, Brazil saw at least 420 fatal victims of anti-LGBTI violence.<sup>7</sup> On October 25, 2020, Joana Domingos — just 19 years old — became the 141st trans person murdered in Brazil this year.<sup>8</sup> The report of our consultation in Barranquilla stated: "In most cases this violence is silenced or treated as commonplace and banal, thus aggravating the effects of violence."

We also saw that hate speech is legitimized by Christian fundamentalist groups that denounce what they call "gender ideology." I mentioned Colombia earlier, where the stories of victims of the war, including women and LGBTI people, have been told. But the very act of gathering such stories, and then the strong influence that voices of victims had in the peace process, enraged conservative politicians and their religious allies. To them, telling the stories and demanding change represented the "imposition of gender ideology."

In Colombia and elsewhere — including Canada — these groups try to instill a sense of panic by singling out the movements that respect sexual diversity and support gender justice. They describe LGBTI movements as threats to public health, the traditional family, established religion, democracy and social order. They would also deny or de-fund sexual and reproductive health services, as well as attention to HIV-positive people and the LGBTI migrant and refugee population. With well-funded allies from the Global North, they bring their advocacy to civil society spaces, including those of the Organization of American States, where they outnumber progressive religious voices.

Christian fundamentalists justify themselves by waving the banner of "re-

ligious freedom.”<sup>9</sup> But freedom of religion is like freedom of speech. Neither can be upheld in ways that undermine the rights of women or people who are discriminated against because of poverty, race, disability, sexual orientation or gender identity or expression. Defence of sexual rights and gender justice is not anti-Christian. It does not, as the fundamentalists allege, attempt to put men above women as a sort of revenge, or to “homosexualize” the entire population.<sup>10</sup>

Women and LGBTI people have been mistreated throughout history: the time for change has come.

Some churches defend the dignity of women and LGBTI people. I mentioned the Colombian Methodist Church earlier, which supports inclusion. Other churches across the region do so as well, together with a tiny handful of Catholic bishops. They create spaces for mutual listening, weaving networks and planting seeds of peace and justice as they raise their voices for a world of greater solidarity. Some seminaries adjust their theological education so that the ministry of inclusion practised by Jesus becomes a model for contemporary ministry. The Multidisciplinary Studies Group on Religion and Public Advocacy (GEMRIP) carries academic and theological reflection on gender justice into public debate.

Many Latin American and Caribbean churches and ecumenical groups participate in the global ACT Alliance of relief and development agencies. In 2017, ACT approved a gender policy that states: “ACT Alliance is committed to respect, empower and protect the dignity, the uniqueness and the intrinsic worth and human rights of every human being. ACT Alliance does not accept any discrimination on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation, disability, nationality, race, religion or belief, class or political opinion so that all people shall have the same power to shape societies, faith communities and their own lives.”<sup>11</sup>

Those of us who met in Barranquilla invited churches and ecumenical groups to work in ways that recognize the dignity and spirituality of LGBTI people and our need for pastoral accompaniment as part of the whole people of God.

In place of fear and prejudice, let us build alliances of solidarity across all borders. Thank you.

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- <sup>1</sup> The United Church of Canada also acknowledged the difference between gender identity and sexual orientation, affirmed that gender identity is not a barrier to membership and ministry, and requested that all existing policy statements that refer only to “sexual orientation” be updated by adding “and gender identities.” For more information on this history, please see *Moving Toward Full Inclusion: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in The United Church of Canada*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 2014) available at [www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/full-inclusion.pdf](http://www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/full-inclusion.pdf) and *Celebrating Gender Diversity: A Toolkit Gender Identity and Trans Experiences for Communities of Faith* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, June 2019) available at [www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/trans-kit\\_2019.pdf](http://www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/trans-kit_2019.pdf).
- <sup>2</sup> L. Mott, “Las Raíces de la Homofobia en América Latina,” no date. Available at [www.censida.salud.gob.mx/descargas/drhumanos/luizmott.pdf](http://www.censida.salud.gob.mx/descargas/drhumanos/luizmott.pdf).
- <sup>3</sup> L. Ramón Mendos, *State-Sponsored Homophobia 2019* (Geneva: International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA), March 2019), pp. 529–530. Available at [https://ilga.org/downloads/ILGA\\_State\\_Sponsored\\_Homophobia\\_2019.pdf](https://ilga.org/downloads/ILGA_State_Sponsored_Homophobia_2019.pdf).
- <sup>4</sup> Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, *Aniquilar la Diferencia: Lesbianas, gays, bisexuales y transgeneristas en el marco del conflicto armado colombiano* (Annihilate the Difference: Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgender People in the Context of the Colombian Armed Conflict) (Bogotá: CNMH, UARIV, USAID and OIM, December 2015), pp. 189–192, 278. Available at [www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/descargas/informes2015/aniquilar-la-diferencia/aniquilar-la-diferencia.pdf](http://www.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/descargas/informes2015/aniquilar-la-diferencia/aniquilar-la-diferencia.pdf).
- <sup>5</sup> This decision has made the legalization of such unions mandatory in the following countries: Barbados, Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Suriname. Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Uruguay are also under the court’s jurisdiction but already had same-sex marriage before the ruling was handed down.
- <sup>6</sup> A. Moloney, “LGBT+ murders at ‘alarming’ levels in Latin America — study,” *Thomson Reuters Foundation*, August 8, 2019. Available at <https://ca.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN1UY2GM>. See also the website of the Regional Information Network on Violence against LGBTI People in Latin America and the Caribbean at <https://sinviolencia.lgbt/quienes-somos>.

- <sup>7</sup> M. Hermanson, “En 2018 hubo 420 víctimas fatales de la violencia contra LGBT en Brasil” (In 2018, there were 420 fatalities of anti-LGBT violence in Brazil), *Brasil de Fato*, February 11, 2019. Available at [www.brasildefato.com.br/2019/02/11/en-2018-hubo-420-victimas-fatales-de-la-violencia-contra-lgbt-en-brasil](http://www.brasildefato.com.br/2019/02/11/en-2018-hubo-420-victimas-fatales-de-la-violencia-contra-lgbt-en-brasil).
- <sup>8</sup> J. Milton, “Joana Domingos dies after being shot seven times. She is the 141st known trans person murdered in Brazil this year alone,” *PinkNews*, October 30, 2020. Available at [www.pinknews.co.uk/2020/10/30/joana-domingos-death-tribute-trans-woman-murder-violence-alagoas-brazil](http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2020/10/30/joana-domingos-death-tribute-trans-woman-murder-violence-alagoas-brazil).
- <sup>9</sup> See, for example, L. Payton, “Christian leaders say faith under attack in Canada by governments, regulators,” *CBC News*, March 25, 2015. Available at [www.cbc.ca/news/politics/christian-leaders-say-faith-under-attack-in-canada-by-governments-regulators-1.3008916](http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/christian-leaders-say-faith-under-attack-in-canada-by-governments-regulators-1.3008916).
- <sup>10</sup> J. Esteban Londoño, “Cristianismo e Ideología de Género” (Christianity and Gender Ideology), *GEMRIP*. Available at [www.gemrip.org/cristianismo-e-ideologia-de-genero](http://www.gemrip.org/cristianismo-e-ideologia-de-genero).
- <sup>11</sup> ACT Alliance, *Gender Justice Policy*, June 2017, p. 2. Available via <https://actalliance.org/documents/act-gender-justice-policy>.

# SECTION TWO

THE CHURCH AND DECRIMINALIZATION  
IN AFRICA AND ASIA





## **Left Behind by Laws, Policies and Practices: Lived Realities of Sexual Minorities in West Africa**

*Ngozi Nwosu-Juba*

“When they got out of the building, they poured petrol on me. I started urinating. They said I was a curse and the reason the town did not have water and people are dying ... When I was rescued from being burnt, my family said they will make a decision on what they will do with me as I am likely to destroy my family reputation.” — Ghanaian lesbian

“I was the favourite member of the choir. Most congregation members say to me that my voice take away their sorrows and I am the reason they hurry to church on Sunday mornings ... All that changed the day my closest friend gave me away. He told the pastor I was gay. The pastor asked me to leave the church as it was an abomination for someone like me to be in the church choir. I contemplated suicide ... I thought the church was a place of acceptance and love...” — Nigerian gay man

“The African church must open its mind to honest conversations. The African bishops need to stop doing the talking and start listening to LGBT people. We are not making much progress with the debate in Africa ... As for the bible and scripture, I just try to do my best to live the way I believe a good person should and leave ‘the book’ to others who do a great job twisting it into what they want to believe.” — Davis Mac-Iyalla, Nigerian LGBTQI rights activist and founder of Interfaith Diversity Network of West Africa

### **The quotes above reflect some of the lived realities of many LGBTQI people in West Africa.**

According to *We Exist*,<sup>1</sup> a report published in 2015, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) people across West Africa live in an increasingly hostile environment. The report stated that a surge in homophobic laws, violence and arrests have focused attention on the struggles of LGBTQI people in the region. The laws, policies and practices as they currently exist in most of West Africa do not in any way support or reflect the various commitments made to promote and protect human rights at regional and international levels, neither do they reflect the preaching and teachings that happen in Africa’s most religious countries. Almost all countries in West Africa have committed to the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which pledge to “leave no one behind.”

Many West African countries have laws either inherited from colonial masters or passed by its leadership criminalizing homosexuality, affecting LGBTQI

people. In 2014, former president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria Goodluck Jonathan signed into law the *Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act*. At about the same time, a similar law was passed in October 2014 by then president of Gambia Yaya Jammeh. In Burkina Faso, although the laws are silent on same-sex practices, there are campaigns for similar laws; likewise in Liberia. Also, there have been a wave of violence and arbitrary arrests in Ivory Coast, Mali and Senegal that target LGBTQI people.<sup>2</sup>

In Ghana, *Criminal Code, 1960 (Act 29)* criminalizes “sexual intercourse with a person in an unnatural manner,”<sup>3</sup> which is widely interpreted as the criminalization of homosexuality, mostly for men. The case for lesbians is less clear. Irrespective of this lack of clarity, lesbian, bisexual, queer and transgender (LBQT) people are not spared in the abuse faced by gay men in the country. Under Liberian law, “voluntary sodomy” is a first-degree misdemeanour and has been for a very long time. The act is inscribed in Article 14.74 of Liberia’s *Penal Law, 1976* and is punishable by up to a year in prison.

In Nigeria, in addition to the *Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act* mentioned earlier, the Criminal Code provides punishment of 14 years in prison for “carnal knowledge of any person against the order of nature.” In 2000 and 2001, the northern states in Nigeria adopted Islamic Sharia law, under which homosexuality can be punished by death. The *Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act* exacerbates the situation of Nigerian LGBTQI people. The law criminalizes same-sex relationships, prohibits the “public show” of same-sex relationships and imposes a 10-year sentence on anyone who “registers, operates or participates in gay clubs, societies and organisations,” including supporters of those groups.

In Sierra Leone, section 61 of the *Offences against the Person Act, 1861* criminalizes buggery with punishment ranging from 10 years to life in prison. The impact of these laws even in countries where they are not actively enforced is that they stir homophobia against LGBTQI people. Cases of mob attacks against same-sex-loving people exist and cut across all regions, with these laws giving perpetrators the license to engage in these violent acts.

The challenge with laws, policies and practices in many West African countries is their interaction with religion and with the peoples’ culture. My work in four countries in West Africa (Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone and Liberia) provides the evidence for this assertion. The former president of Nigeria, in justifying the passage of the *Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act* in 2014, said the majority of Nigerians agitated for the passage of this law. Nigeria is a secular state, where, according to the CIA’s 2019 *The World Factbook*, 49% of its citizens practise Christianity, 49% practise Islam, and 0.9% practise local religions. Attending the public hearing in 2009, which heralded the passing of the *Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act*, were church and mosque representatives who spoke “eloquently” on

how sexual orientations other than heterosexuality and gender identities other than the binary of cis male and cis female are un-African and imported behaviour that might bring the “wrath of God” upon the country and its citizens.

A particular religious leader at the 2009 public hearing of the *Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act* quoted Genesis 13 from the Bible, describing how the event of Sodom and Gomorrah might be unleashed in Nigeria if same-sex relationships were not criminalized in the country. It was surprising to find Muslims and Christians uniting to demand the passage of the discriminatory law on grounds that homosexuality is an abomination in the country! Never before have the two faiths agreed on the same points, except when they involved LGBTQI people and women’s sexual and reproductive health and rights. In 2004, Christian and Muslim groups made presentations that stalled the domestication of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in Nigeria, calling it an “abortion law.” The passage of the *Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act* has led to gross human rights violations of and attacks on LGBTQI people in the country. Public morality, religious interpretations, traditions and cultural beliefs have been used as excuses for passing and upholding the anti-gay laws. On various occasions and in different circumstances, natural disasters have been blamed on homosexuality, the connection often regarded as God’s anger on the people, which religious leaders and followers do not joke about. During an interview within the context of a research study commissioned in 2019 by COC Netherlands, Benice (not her real name) had this to say:

*“Not only was I afraid for my safety, I was also afraid for my parents and siblings who could come under attack for protecting me. Our religion forbids women loving women and I have been involved many times in prayer rituals so that the demon of homosexuality can leave my body.”<sup>4</sup>*

Apart from homophobic attacks, some LGBTQI people suffer from internalized homophobia as a result of the abuse and injustice they face even within faith-based organizations. The criminalization and penalization of consensual same-sex relations between adults, and the widespread violations related to this, demonstrate the deep-rooted aspects of homophobia, transphobia, patriarchy and legislative impunity that exist in most West African countries.

In Sierra Leone, citizens are afraid to disclose their sexuality, as they do not attract sympathy even within religious circles. Agnes (not her real name) had this to say:

*“It is considered an abomination to love a same-sex person. Homosexuality is the only behaviour that has failed to attract sympathy, and there seems to be general agreement that gay people are not welcome in society. There are cases where it is equated*

*with stealing and pedophilia, thereby making it unacceptable within religious and cultural spaces. I had to marry to take away attention from me. I also participate in most church activities. All this will change if they find out that I am lesbian.*"<sup>5</sup>

In Liberia, Josephine (not her real name), a lesbian, believes that lesbians should "tone it down." She asserts that there are Bible verses that do not support same-sex love. "Toning it down" has come to mean that sexual minorities have to live a life of denial and submit to the wishes of the people, which in some instances means marrying a person of the opposite sex or allowing parents to find suitors as a means of protecting their identity.

Given the dominance of Christianity in many countries where homophobia is on the rise, churches in particular are seen as fuelling the repression of African LGBTQI people. It is easy to find evidence to support this. Davis Mac-Iyallah, a Nigerian citizen who sought asylum abroad, decided to go public as a result of the increasingly dysfunctional attitude of the Nigerian Anglican church. He mentioned that he had to come out, to be open about his sexual orientation, because he was exasperated by the increasingly homophobic attitude of the Nigerian Anglican church and its leaders. According to him, first they claim that LGBTQI people do not exist in Africa and then they turn around and condemn them. In the case of Nigeria, when the law was signed in January 2014, the leaders of the local Anglican and Catholic churches were very much in support and so was the entire Christian association and its Muslim counterparts. Mathew, a gay man who sings in the choir, was shattered when the church turned its back on him upon realizing he was gay. He said, "The church did not practise love when they sent me away." In Ghana, aside from the laws and policies, the culture of non-acceptance originates from all people irrespective of religious beliefs. The simple truth is that most African governments and religious leaders have created an environment of fear and terror for LGBTQI people.

A 2014 research study in West Africa<sup>6</sup> notes that one of the major issues against homosexuality is the belief that it is borrowed behaviour and an un-African import from Western countries. Many organizations have been working to challenge this assertion. In 2017, the Interfaith Diversity Network of West Africa convened religious leaders from 10 West African countries. The aim was to create a network of religious leaders who might work towards ending injustices against LGBTQI people. The findings are daunting: while some of the religious leaders thought that LGBTQI people required some form of deliverance to be acceptable, others thought that accepting LGBTQI people required many years of explaining to other members of society who find their behaviours offensive. Some religious leaders at the conference confessed that they had never met a gay person and were surprised that LGBTQI people think and act like humans! A few

agreed that there is a need to accept all humans, seeking time to adjust to the new information. Some thought that accepting gay people would amount to going contrary to God's words and quoted many Bible passages to support the lack of acceptance. The most popular of those quotations were from the Old Testament.

Though this article has focused attention on West Africa, the lack of acceptance extends to other African countries. In a 2020 report,<sup>7</sup> the African Christian Democratic Party has described LGBTQI people as sinners who practise acts that undermine African values and religion. They further said it is the desire of the liberal West to impose the "LGBTQI agenda" on the African continent, urging those who wish to see the moral and social fibre of African communities strengthened to reject the call in its entirety. The connection between laws and people's practices of upholding their culture is seen in their misconception of interpreting same-sex love as practice rather than a sexual orientation.

Responding to the African Christian Democratic Party on Facebook, Davis Mac-Iyallah described the party as an offensive group of associates who have no idea of what they are talking about. He urged African traditional leaders to tell the truth about human sexuality or admit their outright ignorance to create room for educational dialogue. In a telephone interview, Mac-Iyallah explained that some of the misconceptions led to his establishing the Interfaith Diversity Network of West Africa, which promised to bring as many religious leaders as possible to the circle of learning and knowledge creation.

Though gay men suffer abuse, lesbians and gender non-conforming people face more injustice. Due to the HIV pandemic, many organizations that cater to men who have sex with men (MSM) receive support, creating some form of visibility.<sup>8</sup> This is not the case for lesbians who face twice the violence other women face. Lesbians are often referred to as deviant and stubborn women. In most West African countries, as in other parts of the continent, patriarchy is deeply rooted. Within this system, gender is conceived in strictly binary terms, and female sexuality is valued only as a means of procreation. Women are regarded as family property and become their husband's property after marriage. A woman's status depends on her marital status and her ability to bear children. An unmarried woman is severely stigmatized; she is considered to have failed her generation. Christian teachings also emphasize marriage and its honour. Lesbians are sometimes regarded as women who have failed to find male partners. Generally, LGBTQI people are seen as people who are challenging God by refusing to marry and fulfill the Bible mandate on procreation and replenishing the earth.

In 2012, at the Nigerian Feminist Forum, a 23-year-old lesbian told other workshop delegates the story of how her father, who is a religious leader, with the support of other members of the family, held her legs wide open so that her uncle could have sexual intercourse with her to "cure" her of lesbian love. Church

teachings, especially in West Africa, condemn lesbian relationships outright. According to a lawyer and popular pastor in a church in Lagos, Nigeria, “Homosexuality is the only sin against God that cannot be forgiven.” In his own words, it is an affront to God, and every true believer must challenge and condemn it. Religious teachings such as described above are common within the Christian faith, making LGBTQI people stay away from places of worship.

“The pervasive nature of violence based on perceived or actual sexual orientation and gender identity prompted the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights to adopt Resolution 2759 at its 55th Ordinary Session in Luanda, Angola, calling on state parties to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights to put in place mechanisms that protect citizens from violence experienced as a result of sexual orientation and gender identity.”<sup>9</sup> This resolution of the African Commission was a milestone in the Commission’s commitment toward the fulfillment of its mandate.

### **What Roles Are Expected from Religious Leaders?**

Although several studies, including the *We Exist* report, identified a need to initiate dialogue with religious and traditional leaders, very few organizations are doing this. Almost no work is being done to support LGBTQI people to reconcile their faith with their sexual orientations and gender identities. House of Rainbow and the Levites Initiative for Freedom and Enlightenment in Nigeria are the only LGBTQI faith-based organization in West Africa.<sup>10</sup> House of Rainbow works primarily in anglophone countries but has plans to expand further in Africa, with an additional focus on francophone regions. Unfortunately, while based in Nigeria, the House of Rainbow was threatened through a media frenzy in 2011, forcing the pastor to flee to the United Kingdom, where the organization is still run today. Levites Initiative is based in Delta State, Nigeria, and helps LGBTQI people reconcile their sexuality with their faith. The Interfaith Diversity Network of West Africa was established in 2017. So far, it has trained more than 70 religious leaders and strengthened the capacity of more than 200 LGBTQI people to assert their right to practise their religion. According to Davis Mac-Iyallah, “there is the need to build the capacity of religious leaders in West Africa to focus on the tenets of the Bible on love and acceptance.”

There is an urgent need to invest funding and extend technical support to organizations working on faith and sexuality. Their work is critical towards bringing religious leaders to the circle of learning and knowledge about sexual diversities.

Most West African states are secular, without an official religion. Religious-based laws such as the *Sharia Penal Code* in northern Nigeria and the *Criminal Code, 1960 (Act 29)* in Ghana and other countries need to be brought in conformity with international human rights laws, which promote all rights,

including those based on sexual orientation and gender identity; protect LGBTQI people from discrimination; and prohibit capital punishment for consensual sexual relationships.

The various countries' Constitutions, especially the chapters on fundamental human rights, should conform with countries' endorsements and ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international human rights treaties, which protect from discrimination based on any grounds, including sexual orientation and gender identity.

The emergence of anti-homosexuality politics in Africa is often justified by referring to religion. Given the dominance of Christianity in many countries where homophobia seems on the rise, churches, in particular, whose words and actions fuel repression and homophobia, should bring their teaching to conform to the tenets of love as espoused by the Holy Bible.

Lawmakers in many African countries should not rely on religious sentiments when enacting laws and end the use of religious arguments to enact laws.

Churches and religious bodies should contribute to research and documentation to understand that non-heteronormativity is not new and has been part of human life. By doing so, they will reduce stigma and discrimination and eradicate the notion that homosexuality is un-African.

LGBTQI rights are human rights and must be respected, with religious groups playing a leadership role.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Armisen, *We Exist: Mapping LGBTQ Organizing in West Africa* (West Africa LGBTQ Activist Fund Brain Trust and Queer African Youth Network, 2015), p. 4. Available at <https://s3.amazonaws.com/astraea-production/app/asset/uploads/2016/10/WeExist.pdf>.

- 2 COC Netherlands, unpublished research report, 2019, p. 11.
- 3 *Criminal Code*, 1969 (Act 29), s. 104(2).
- 4 COC Netherlands.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 P.P. Rodenbough, “On Being LGBT in West Africa,” Virtual Student Foreign Service project and independent report, July 2014, p. 8. Available at <https://blogs.cuit.columbia.edu/rightsviews/files/2015/03/Being-LGBT-in-West-Africa-Project.pdf>.
- 7 Available via [www.mambaonline.com](http://www.mambaonline.com).
- 8 Armisen, *We Exist*, p. 5.
- 9 Queer Alliance Nigeria, “A Shadow Report on Human Rights Violations Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Nigeria,” submitted for consideration for the 31st Session of the Universal Periodic Review, March 29, 2018, p. 5.
- 10 Armisen, *We Exist*, p. 18.



# Radical Inclusion: Dare to Dream

*R. Christopher Rajkumar*

Let me begin this essay with two real-life incidents that have challenged me to write this.

## **#1 My Son Is Not Eligible to Live**

Mariyappan (name changed), my classmate and close friend for ten years, who came from a deprived background, died when he was 15. His parents, who were daily-wage labourers, dreamt that their son would get a government job and deliver them from their financial struggles. Mariyappan was a bright student who always stood first in academics and an active athlete who had won many school-level and inter-school competitions.

When we were in high school, he gradually started expressing his femininity for which other mates teased him in school, which made his days dreadful and humiliating. A few staff tagged him as “pottai” or “onbathu” (local derogatory slang for transgender persons) and asked his parents to stop his schooling, at which the entire family was shattered. He stopped coming to school.

He lived in the outskirts of the village, known as “cheri” (slum, where the out-caste and discriminated people live), difficult to be accessed by proper road. However, after a month, I went to his house to know what had happened to him. To my shock, I found his photo garlanded. He had passed away two days before my visit. I felt so heartbroken, especially as I heard it was a mysterious death, to which his parents and siblings were a party.

A question that troubled my mind was whether he was killed only because of his feminine behaviours. It took years for me to understand about gender fluidity and identity. Today, I realize that among financially disadvantaged and socially discriminated communities, fluid and diverse gender identities is a dishonour that results in honour killings.

## **#2 My Son Is Not a Criminal**

Stan (name changed), an ordained minister in my church, was my friend for more than 25 years, even as he was a smart and a jovial young boy. He was creative in his rendering of scriptural passages and theological concepts. We have debated and clarified various topics, including academic questions that he had struggled with. I often admired his in-depth Bible knowledge and his strong faith in God.

Stan’s parents, who were teachers in a mission school, nurtured him in a conservative Christian setting. All of them were active in every church activity.

During one of my visits, his mother shared with tears that Stan was behaving differently and that he was relating only with boys, especially with one particular boy. On the one hand, she was worried since she thought that Stan's behaviour was culturally "abnormal," spiritually unacceptable, biblically sinful and legally criminal. On the other, as a Christian and a mother, she struggled to share this concern with anyone, including the local pastor. However, since she considered me part of their family, she told me about her plans to "correct him" by sending him to a seminary and, further, asked me to counsel Stan to "make him normal."

After a few years, on a beautiful morning in our chapel, I found him with a swollen face. I assumed he had cried all night and hence inquired why he seemed to be sad. Immediately, he broke down and told me that he was gay and that the boy with whom he had a relationship, a Sunday School mate, met with an accident and died. Stan felt empty and alone. Although those were the days when I could not accept gay relationships, which I thought was a sin, I did not condemn him. Instead, I wanted to help Stan to come out of this "sin."

After our studies, both of us left the college, and Stan joined the church. His mother, anxious at her son's "abnormal" behaviour with his members, thought he would become "normal" once he would get married, and hence started seeking proposals for him. Stan, scared by this move by his mother, asked me to talk to his mother and stop all efforts of getting him married. I assured him that I would talk to his mother, but within myself, I thought not to talk, since I considered that to be gay was a sin, and hence, he ought to change. Ultimately, he got married.

However, after the marriage, Stan honestly shared everything with his wife. She was shocked to realize her husband was gay, but being brought up as an Indian woman, she thought her duty was to accept the "fate." Thus, Stan and his wife agreed to continue their married life but to stay away from each other. Hence, Stan sent his wife to a distant residential study program while he stayed back and ministered at the local church. However, his congregation was not happy with this decision and persuaded him to leave the pastoral ministry to take up a cross-cultural ministry abroad, where they thought he would not face any stigma.

Owing to their advice, Stan left for Australia and started ministering there as an openly gay pastor. For many years, Stan did not contact any of his family members, friends or relatives. After several years when he tried to contact his mother, she forced him to return. He refused, since he knew that the cultural and spiritual stigmatization and discrimination that prevail in India would harm not only him but also his family.

Recently, his mother called me, and with all excitement, she said: "My son is no longer a criminal. Please ask him to come back." This happened soon after the Supreme Court repealed section 377 of the *Indian Penal Code* (IPC). According to Stan's mother, Stan is **not a criminal**.

I am reminded of a narration recorded in Luke 15, where a father received and embraced his “lost” son with a grand celebration at home. It was time for Stan’s mother to experience the same. Let us join such mothers in thanking God for the Supreme Court of India’s judgment to repeal section 377. As she waits to celebrate her beloved son’s return any moment, let us hope that Stan will return soon.

There are a few more real-life personal experiences that have often challenged and even disturbed me in my spiritual, theological, missiological and ministerial journey. Some of the questions that I have struggled with are as follows:

1. Is sexuality or sexual identity a sin? Is sexual identity a dishonour to a family, a society and a church?
2. If God created all, who created trans people? If God created all in God’s image, whose image do trans people bear? According to trans people and People of Different Sexual Orientations (PDSOs), what could be the image of God?
3. If God is God of all and God for all, why are LGBTQIA+ people discriminated against and excluded?
4. Is the church that claims to be an inclusive institution a safe and secure space for LGBTQIA+ people?
5. Do our churches practise and promote exclusion?
6. If not the church, who will include the discriminated and excluded communities?
7. Can the church or theology discriminate anyone in the name of God?

These questions and learning have pushed me further to passionately work towards the “radical inclusion” of LGBTQIA+ people and other socially, religiously, historically and spiritually excluded communities. In this essay, I attempt to share and suggest a few theological and missiological perspectives regarding the radical inclusion of sexual minorities, especially in light of my learning from and with them.

### **Scanning the Contexts**

There is a rising awareness among churches and global theological fraternities on engaging in and dealing with issues related to sex, sexuality, homophobia, LGBTQIA+ people, PDSOs, gender minorities and queer theologies. Academia has already started re-reading Christian scriptures and their interpretations from perspectives of the discriminated communities — to the extent of supporting same-sex marriage and the concept of living together. However, for any faith community, including traditional Christianity, conversations on sex and sexuality are taboo, and there is great reluctance to speak or teach them openly. They are usually discussed in private because sex is seen as dirty, vulgar and not a topic to

be discussed in public, especially in front of children and particularly girls. It is still forbidden to the extent of being judged as a moral issue and is often assumed to be a culture imported or imposed by Western societies to disfigure Eastern culture and spirituality. It is a challenge to faith communities in the East, including Christians, especially considering the subcontinent tradition, culture and context.

### **Indian Conversations on Radical Inclusion**

In India, the *Kama Sutra*, probably composed by Vatsyayana, between 400 BCE and 300 BCE, prove that the Aryan-Hindu tradition has had a conversation on sexuality.<sup>1</sup> It is considered as one of the oldest serving Hindu texts on erotic love (eroticism) and emotional fulfillment in life. The *Kama Sutra* is predominantly a sex manual on sexual pleasure. It was written and given as a guide to the art of living, the nature of love, finding a life partner, maintaining one's love life and other pleasure-oriented aspects of human life.<sup>2</sup>

Further, the statue depictions in the Khajuraho temples (in caves), dated back to 950 CE and 1050 CE, illustrate the idea of life that engaged aesthetic, erotic and inspirational love-art outside and inside the temple.<sup>3</sup> Many historians state that these erotic arts are part of depicting in a Hindu temple the Aryan-Hindu tradition of treating "kama" as an essential and proper part of human life. For instance, James McConachie, in his history of the *Kama Sutra*, describes the sexual-themed Khajuraho sculptures as "the apogee of erotic art."<sup>4</sup> Many other Hindu temples have such statues and depictions in outside towers and inside pillars and walls, which the devotees touch and worship.

Therefore, faith-based conversations on sex and sexuality were prevalent in the Hindu tradition, although absent in contemporary public conversations. In Islam and Christianity, even though there are several literatures that deal with sexuality, they remain in the dark.

### **A Historical Survey of Ecumenical Conversations on "Radical Inclusivity"**

The World Council of Churches (WCC) took up the discourse on sex and sexuality at least 50 years ago. In 1968, at the Uppsala Assembly, there was a discussion on birth control. Reflections on "alternative lifestyles" in an ecumenical consultation on sexism held in Berlin in 1974 further inspired the WCC to address sexuality theologically. In 1975, the Nairobi Assembly formally called for "a theological study of sexuality, taking into account the culture of the member churches." Thus, for over a half-century, the WCC has been holding conversations on sex and sexuality. Due to the diverse culture and tradition of its members, the WCC could not come to a consensus but created a space for all sexual orientations to come together, discuss and participate in these deliberations.<sup>5</sup>

In 2009, the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) in its discussion paper on

pastoral guidelines to HIV and AIDS, noted and proposed:

*One of the challenges for what the churches can do is “to seek to understand more fully the gifts of human sexuality in the contexts of personal responsibility, relationship, family and Christian faith.” We can no longer ignore the importance of discussing these gifts of God in Churches. We need to uphold mutual respect in all forms of relationships.*<sup>6</sup>

There were several such discussions held for years among the churches. In the context of an ecumenical dialogue, it is reasonable to note that the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church have, over the last 80 years, adopted different stances on some matters related to marriage, relationship and sexuality.

It is interesting to note that the Anglicans were far ahead in discussing the issues in the early 1930s. At the Lambeth Conference of bishops held in 1930, the majority of those present overturned the decision they made a decade earlier and affirmed the use of contraception in marriage in restricted circumstances (Resolution 15 and Resolutions 9–20). The Anglicans were the first to move on this and were condemned by the Pope within months (Pope Pius XI promulgated *Casti connubii* on December 31, 1930). However, over the succeeding decades, the Anglican stance was embraced by several Protestant churches.<sup>7</sup> Bishop Peter, Bishop of the Diocese of Ecumenical and Old Catholic Faith Communities, writes in his Pastoral Letter on Human Sexuality: The Sacred Body:

*[...] the Christian understanding of sexual morality, like many other issues in Christian teaching, has developed over time. What remains consistent is the standard of measure, which is love. In order to clarify and contextualize our understanding of same sex relationships in the life of the Church, we have used the great commandment of love to frame our faith journey.*<sup>8</sup>

Concerning ecumenical conversations about sexuality, the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) in 1990 deliberated on several related themes such as family, women, girl child (sexual) abuse, sex tourism, family planning, premarital and extramarital affairs, and abortion. At one point, the NCCI initiated an open conversation on the rights of PDSOs, which vehemently critiqued the traditions and practices of the church to the extent that the statement was banned from circulation. After almost a decade, in 2003, the Ecumenical Christian Centre (ECC), Bangalore, and the Student Christian Movement of India (SCMI) initiated different conversations. The ECC issued an epistle to Indian churches to consider human sexuality as a missiological and ministerial issue.<sup>9</sup>

## **From Ecumenical to Personal**

The pioneering attempts to facilitate Indian churches to have a few conversations on the aforementioned issues related to sex and sexuality had a very marginal impact on the churches, since the statements and research documents were shared among only a few organizations and partners. However, these ecumenical documents moulded my theological and ministerial orientation, as a result of which, in 2003, while serving at the ECC as deputy director, I organized a seminar on “families in transition.” This seminar, which dealt with themes such as gender fluidity, same-sex orientation and family, was received with mixed responses.

The year 2009 was a pivotal year for the “inclusive” life and work of the churches in India. On July 2, 2009, the High Court of Delhi pronounced a historical judgment that legitimized consensual homosexual activities between adults. This judgment overturned the 150-year-old IPC section 377, which considered same-sex relationships as dehumanizing and criminal. The secular ideologists welcomed the judgment as they thought it would pave the way to respect the dignity of persons with different sexual orientations and help them to come out openly to avail of health-care and other such services to have better lives. However, various faith communities, including the church, opposed the judgment and issued statements based on their respective scripture and moral value systems.

Several media sought a response to this verdict from the NCCI, and I, being the then executive secretary for the Commission on Justice, Peace and Creation, was asked to formulate a statement. The statement, thus drafted, assured to study the verdict and the issue in deep, as well as to facilitate discussions on the issue with the member churches and organizations. While the progressive, secular movements and leaders welcomed the move, several member churches, leaders and other faith communities thought the move was heretic, misleading the NCCI.<sup>10</sup> Some of the churches and Regional Christian Councils issued press statements rejecting the proposal and demanded the NCCI to drop the study proposal. In many places, the churches burnt the effigy and threatened the NCCI that they would withdraw their memberships. Anonymous letters were sent to NCCI officials against the statement as well as against me. I was also morally abused. Although initially, I felt disappointed by these responses and reactions, ultimately it motivated me to engage fully, openly and transparently in this study process, with a conviction to learn and to teach.

The study process, thus initiated, gave me rich spiritual experiences. The outcome of my study has benefited the churches inside and outside India to consider a few paradigm shifts in their missional and ministerial approaches: From Great Commission to Great Commandment, Morality to Ethics, With Text to Experience, Rites to Rights, From Conventional to Contextual, and From Preaching to Practice. I share this case for any church or organization to work towards inclu-

sion. The bottom line for this missiological shift was not mission **to** the margins but **from** and **with** the margins, in as much as the so-called margins become the centre and personal faith experiences become post-canonical scriptures.

### **From Great Commission to Great Commandment**

The churches encourage the pew to get involved in the “great commission” (preaching the gospel) as a missiological activity and often overlook the “great commandment.” An interface between church leaders and LGBTQIA+ friends was held to have a better understanding of both. For most of the bishops, it was a first-of-a-kind experience, listening to the stories of LGBTQIA+ people and their expectations from the churches. Most of the church leaders thought that the LGBTQIA+ community was another outreach ministerial sector to minister and proselytized. But they were challenged by the following faith questions of their LGBTQIA+ friends:

1. If churches close their doors for us, where will we go?
2. If churches are not embracing us, who will?
3. If churches close their ears to us, who will hear our cries?
4. Can you deliver us from our “closets”?
5. Can you become that confidential partner to whom we could share our pains and difficulties, when even our parents and family members fail to be so?
6. If the God of the Bible is one who loves and accepts and embraces everyone on the earth, irrespective of their limitations, can the Church oppose that God?
7. If you believe that God is the ultimate judge, how can you judge us on our sexuality?
8. Can you rethink your theologies and moral codes that prevent us from our right to worship and participate in the mission and ministries of the church as any other humans?
9. Can the “real” church exclude anyone?

These questions not only challenged the church leaders but also gave them a new vision and understanding of the mission and ministry relevant to our times. The bottom line of this conversation was whether the church was “love-all” and “all-inclusive.” Most surprisingly, there was a shift in the thought process among the church leaders to work on the great commandment instead of the great commission.

### **From Morality to Ethics**

All faith traditions claim they are the guardians of the moral conscience of their faiths and adherents. During several interfaith conversations and interactions

concerning human sexuality, leaders representing faith communities contend any such conversations. For instance, many church leaders consider human sexuality a matter of sin and unbiblical; same-sex activities are a sin and unnatural. They tend to reject any conversation on sexuality as ungodly. The court verdict repealing IPC section 377 would result in moral chaos for them. They believe that faith communities have the moral responsibility to help the society from such moral chaos.

However, they often forget that such moral and legal positions were even questioned by Jesus Himself, who asked if the law was for people or if people were for the law. Faith traditions often forget that people are more essential than moral codes. They always elevate moral codes to judge all, forgetting that judgment belongs to God alone. The biblical message is clear: one needs to look at such issues ethically rather morally.

### ***With Text to Experience***

An interfaith round table on human sexuality helped the faith traditions to understand and explain why they should get involved in such conversations. It was a profitable experience for representatives from the seven major faiths in India to study scriptures of different faiths together. The participants realized that the problem was not with the scriptures, which were often very inclusive, but with the interpreters, who promoted exclusion in the name of morality and God. The delegates resolved to move with text to experience, which were to be considered as the post-canonical scriptures and sources to articulate theologies.

Most of the theological articulations are canonical text-bound; i.e. the biblical and scriptural texts are considered the source to articulate any theology. The theological round table on human sexuality, attended by both professional theologians and friends from the LGBTQIA+ community, created a new scope for Indian theologies in the making. This program was designed as an academic exercise to listen to renowned theologians and scholars from biblical, theological, ethical and ministerial perspectives, with representatives of the LGBTQIA+ community as the audience. After listening to scholars, the friends from the LGBTQIA+ community said those presentations were irrelevant and had nothing to do with their lives. Hence, there was a shift suggested to listen to them. They were asking the theologians and academics to answer the following simple questions:

- Why did God create us like this?
- What could be the image of God for a transgender person if all are created in God's image?

Unfortunately, the scholars could not justify their articulations. Such simple theological questions overturned the table again. But at the same time, theo-



gians and scholars have realized the need for an open acceptance of the realities without any academic arrogance. The theologians present agreed to hold personal experience as the source to articulate theologies related to human sexuality referring to biblical texts instead of interpreting the texts alone without any experience. Further, there was also a general sense that only the LGBTQIA+ friends and their families could subjectively get involved in articulating their theologies, not just non-LGBTQIA+ professional theologians engaging in an armchair intellectual exercise.

### **Rites to Rights**

Most of the ecclesial confessions give importance to rites rather than rights. Modern missiological thought strongly affirms that there is no gospel without justice. In most cases, church leaders discuss sex scandals against clerics and how they are targeted. In fact, one has to wonder whether churches are aware of and capable enough to address issues related to LGBTQIA+ people, sex and human sexuality. In most cases, it was identified that the clerics were the reasons for such problems. However, what concerns us more is that the churches are still on their traditional mode, considering sex as a sin. Even many seminaries and theological colleges do not train theological candidates to handle such situations efficiently, professionally, scientifically, honestly, biblically and theologically. In many cases, our LGBTIQ+ friends are kept away from the very life and work of the churches and cast as sinners.

Hence, a theological training was organized for theological educators to emphasize the importance of these particular concerns while training candidates for pastoral ministry in seminaries. To motivate the theological students and seminaries, we developed an (optional) undergraduate theology course curriculum on human sexuality for the Senate of Serampore College (University), with which 58 theological schools in India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal are affiliated. We organized a few pedagogy workshops for theological educators to further plan and work on the theology of sexuality along with the local congregations. This attempt was aimed at facilitating the ecclesial confessions and theological schools to affirm the gospel that assures the rights of any individual and group to worship and fully participate in the very life and work of a church.

### **From Conventional to Contextual**

The study mentioned above resulted in drafting an *Ecumenical Document on Human Sexuality*, which was officially adopted and issued by the General Assembly of the NCCI. As it is the practice, the document was sent to the heads of the churches to be read in every pew. Among several feedback that we received, one response was that the document was so theological that the laity could not follow

and understand it. The pew was looking for a document with biblical interpretations, especially dealing with the critical biblical passages on human sexuality. Hence, a workshop was organized to generate a few Bible studies. Ten Bible studies by 30 post-graduate theological students and pastors were published to benefit the laity. These Bible studies accompanied the theological document to make it relevant and contextual.

### **From Preaching to Practice**

The church, in general, is often blamed for not practising what it preaches. As the NCCI engaged in this study process through several seminars and programs, many suspected if one could practise what we had deliberated and developed concerning human sexuality. Therefore, in order to put our preaching into practice, we campaigned among members of the governing body to have representatives from excluded communities, such as people with disabilities and LGBTQIA+ people, in the Quadrennial Assembly, the highest decision-making body where over 500 top-level Indian church leaders assemble to contemplate prevalent issues and to officially respond shortly. The proposal was welcomed, and the executive committee of the NCCI decided to invite two persons to represent the LGBTQIA+ communities to the General Assembly as official delegates. The presence of the LGBTQIA+ friends not only created history in terms of the assembly procedures but also helped the representatives to experience inclusion. Further, their presence in the Assembly greatly influenced National Church leaders and Assembly participants. One of the LGBTQIA+ representatives wrote to the president of NCCI about their experience.

*We were looked down and avoided by the Assembly delegates on the first day. The second day people started smiling at us; on the third day, when we were called up to the dais and honoured, we became celebrities, and most of the participants including many women and bishops have taken photos with us. We would like to have a similar experience in our churches too.<sup>11</sup>*

Further, as an attempt to practise our preaching, it was proposed to initiate an official program forum of sexual and gender diversities, which could be part of the NCCI program structure. The proposal was very well received, and the General Body accepted the proposal. To mark the centennial journey of the NCCI, at the concluding celebration on November 6, 2014, the National Ecumenical Forum for Gender and Sexual Diversities was inaugurated by the NCCI president as a standing forum of the NCCI. This forum planned for a pre-assembly on the eve of the NCCI's XXVIII Quadrennial Assembly to deliberate on the theme "towards inclusive rainbow churches." That year, the Assembly had 10 sexual minority representatives as official delegates. This further motivated several churches to

become inclusive by appointing transgender friends in their institution to affirm their dignity and accompany them ministerially.

The interactions impacted the churches to understand the need for “radical inclusion” more biblically, theologically and ministerially. There were times of heated arguments, accusing each other, vehemently opposing each other’s position and lifestyles, which made the sessions vibrant with cross-learning exercises. These conversations have helped church leaders and our LGBTQIA+ friends to understand each other’s expectations. These initiatives and interventions paved the way for several theologians and church leaders to engage in conversations in person with friends from the LGBTQIA+ community for better understanding that helped them to look for shifts in their biblical, theological and missiological outlooks towards “radical inclusion” as mentioned above.

### **Conclusion: A Need for Radical Inclusion**

In light of the above discussion, the following concerns motivate us to work toward “radical inclusion.”

1. If the church closes its doors for these neglected, stigmatized, discriminated communities, who will embrace them?
2. Can the church exclude anyone in the name of God?
3. LGBTQIA+ individuals and groups are to be ministered with utmost care in sharing the love of God through pastoral-praxis.
4. Judgment belongs to God. Why should we judge others on their orientations?
5. Every individual has a right to worship, pray and participate in the very life and work of the church. Hence, LGBTQIA+ individuals should have an experience of worshiping in Spirit and Truth through the life and work of any church.
6. Let the church be an instrument to express the inclusive nature of God.
7. Radical inclusion should be the missiological agenda of the church today.

### **Here I Stand**

I always go with my convictions. My position on the issues of LGBTQIA+ people, sex and sexuality continue to hinder the institutionalized church from embracing me. In fact, after my NCCI assignment, my church was not willing to accept me as a priest. Many mission (evangelical) organizations rejected my candidature because of my stand on LGBTQIA+ issues, sex and sexuality, and the church. However, like Martin Luther, I, too, boldly say, “Here I Stand.” I join Martin Luther King, Jr., in saying, “I, too, have a dream” — of an inclusive church: a church *of* all, *for* all and *with* all. Amen.

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Christopher Rajkumar, an ordained minister of the Church of South India, served the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) as its Executive Secretary for “Justice, Peace and Creation,” and “Mission, Ecumenism and Diaconia” for a decade. While he served the National Council, he initiated a two-year theological and missiological study concerning the response of churches to human sexuality. After the study, he facilitated the National Council to have the “National Ecumenical Forum of Gender and Sexual Diversities” as an official programme of the NCCI. He served as its first director of the same. Currently, he is serving as the founder-director of the “Centre for Promoting Peace and Inclusion.”

- <sup>1</sup> J. Sengupta, *Refractions of Desire, Feminist Perspectives in the Novels of Toni Morrison, Michèle Roberts, and Anita Desai* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2006), p. 21.
- <sup>2</sup> W. Doniger, “The “Kamasutra”: It Isn’t All about Sex,” *The Kenyon Review* New Series 25, 1 (Winter 2003): 18–37.
- <sup>3</sup> UNESCO announced this site as a World Heritage site. See P. Dey, “Khajuraho Temples are more than just erotic; here are some interesting facts,” *Times of India*, July 12, 2019. Available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/travel/destinations/khajuraho-temples-are-more-than-just-erotic-here-are-some-interesting-facts/as70192795.cms>.
- <sup>4</sup> M.D. Rabe, “Secret Yantras and Erotic Display for Hindu Temples,” in D.G. White (ed.), *Tantra in Practice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 434–446.
- <sup>5</sup> World Council of Churches, “Churches’ response to human sexuality,” February 14, 2006. Available at [www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/churches-response-to-human-sexuality](http://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/churches-response-to-human-sexuality).
- <sup>6</sup> E.N. Senturias, *A Discussion Paper on “The Christian Conference of Asia’s Pastoral Guidelines on HIV and AIDS,”* February 4, 2009. Available at [www.cca.org.hk/news-and-events/discussion-paper-on-the-christian-conference-of-asias-pastoral-guidelines-on-hiv-and-aids](http://www.cca.org.hk/news-and-events/discussion-paper-on-the-christian-conference-of-asias-pastoral-guidelines-on-hiv-and-aids).
- <sup>7</sup> [http://newcastleanglican.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Ecumenical\\_Dialogue\\_-\\_Human\\_sexuality.pdf](http://newcastleanglican.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Ecumenical_Dialogue_-_Human_sexuality.pdf) (10/10/2011)
- <sup>8</sup> P. Stuart, “Pastoral Letter on Human Sexuality: The Sacred Body,” no date. Available via <http://ecumenical-catholic-communion.org>.
- <sup>9</sup> “Ecumenical chronicle: An epistle on human sexuality to churches in India,” *The Ecumenical Review* 56, 4 (October 2004): 513–518.
- <sup>10</sup> [http://www.telegraphindia.com/1090805/jsp/frontpage/story\\_11322140.jsp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1090805/jsp/frontpage/story_11322140.jsp) (10/12/2009)
- <sup>11</sup> Bishop T.S. Sagar, “Next Century Indian Ecumenism,” cited in C. Rajkumar (ed.), *Prophetic Ecumenism* (National Council of Churches in India, 2014).

# Welcome One Another as Christ Welcomes Us

*Rev. Alfred Candid M. Jaropillo*

## **The World God So Loves**

One Sunday afternoon, “Pastor,” asked one gay member of the church, “does God really love me?”

This is a common question we hear from our youth LGBTQIA+ members who find themselves spiritually orphaned inside our churches.

Another question we often hear in our faith communities is from worried and anxious parents of LGBTQIA+ kids. “Pastor, will my son/daughter go to hell?”

Soul-piercing, this question indicates a spiritual crisis of families in our congregations. In a larger context, this spiritual crisis in our churches is also a social and political issue in the country. In a five-country research and documentation project on violence and discrimination against LGBTQIA+ people, Outright Action International classified this kind of religious experience (i.e. spiritual crisis) as a manifestation of violence. Particularly this violence is named as violence in the name of religion. Subtle and insidious, this violence corrodes and destroys self-confidence and self-worth. As seen in the questions above from the church youth or the parent, violence in the name of religion is spiritually troubling; and in many instances, it is a death-dealing reality for our LGBTQIA+ church members.

Sadly today, the world God so loves is marked with widespread violence committed against members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Crimes against sexual minorities have become a normal part of everyday life. The cry of Jesus on the cross, of forsakenness,<sup>1</sup> has become the cry of our LGBTQIA+ brothers and sisters.

## **Our Declaration of Faithfulness to Jesus Christ**

The United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) pledges loyalty to no one but to Jesus Christ alone. Our commitment and conviction is anchored on this unswerving faithfulness to the crucified and risen Messiah whom we declare as God’s self-revelation in history. Our participation to his mission and ministry of which we are called to be companions to one and each other on the way of the cross is our faithful demonstration and witness to God’s will for all of us to have an abundant life for which the Holy Scripture also attests. Like many pilgrims in this faith journey, we are part of the clouds of witnesses testifying to God’s sustaining and overflowing grace for all of us.

We thus make this theological statement on gender justice because we seek to renew our commitment and affirm yet again our faithfulness to Jesus our Lord and Saviour whom God anoints to bring good news to the poor, proclaim freedom

for prisoners and oppressed, give sight to the blind, exorcise our demons, heal our inadequacies, restore us to wholeness, grant mercy and declare forgiveness, and lead us all to liberation and salvation. In this pronouncement, we boldly declare our allegiance to the mission of the Messiah. As his disciples, we humbly walk with him to respond to the call of God to “do justice, to love kindness.”<sup>2</sup>

If there was one policy statement of the UCCP that has stirred so much reaction, debate and alarm, as well as rejoicing among some sympathetic members, it is the 2014 approved statement concerning the LGBTQIA+ community.

The UCCP affirms that all, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity and expression, are under the grace of God. In 2014, the UCCP unanimously approved Let Grace Be Total, a policy statement on lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people at its 10th Quadrennial General Assembly and 66th Founding Anniversary.

### **We Are Created in the Image of God**

Genesis 1:27 (NRSV) tells us that we are all created in the likeness and image of God. Thus, nothing in us is apart from God. Our whole lives bear divine imprint and traces of glorious radiance. God is in and through us. We believe, therefore, that human beings are *imago dei*.

Such is a gift bestowed upon us. That each and every human person is unique and irreplaceable, anointed and commissioned to represent and do holy goodness. Social categories and cultural classifications that separate and divide us by race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality or ethnicity, and even religious identity are only artificial human-made distinctions. In God, “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female.”<sup>3</sup>

As a church, we demonstrate this witness to the Filipino people through our “prophetic and pastoral witness in the life and culture of the Filipino people. The Church supports the people’s aspirations for abundant life and holistic redemption from all forms of bondage, in accordance with the vision of the reign of God.”<sup>4</sup>

To further testify to the biblical witness of our faith, the Church affirms and upholds “the inviolability of the rights of persons as reflected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other agreements on human rights, the international covenants on economic, social and cultural rights and on civil and political rights, the 1984 Convention against Torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and those that relate specifically to refugees, women, youth, children, minority groups and other persons who cannot safeguard their own rights.”<sup>5</sup>

Because Christ rejects no one, so should we. We welcome without condition each one and every other. For Christ welcomed us in the same abundant spirit without question. In the same way God so loves this world unconditionally.<sup>6</sup>

## **Marginalization, Exclusion, Discrimination of Members of Sexual Minorities: Those Whom We Have Not Loved and Welcomed**

In our society, sexual minorities are either marginalized or excluded or discriminated against. Considered as deviants, members of the LGBTIA+ community have been the object of hate; viewed as abnormal, they are victims of bullying, harassment and sexual violence in our society. Those who are not victimized or hated are a source of fun and entertainment.

But they too are the silenced church members of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines. For fear of being ostracized and rejected by their Christian family, they remain hidden from plain sight. They live their lives privately and secretly away from the prying eyes and angry hearts of their Christian siblings.

Those who are openly out, while tolerated, are allowed in the church and ministry as long as they are useful to its activities. They are welcomed only if they conform to the heterosexual norm — to reject the life they have, know and feel is theirs. They have never been truly accepted for who they are as a human person. Demonized, they are only accepted by the church if they deny their personality and personhood and become someone else, not in accord to how they feel and how they understand who they are as a human being. They are only part of the communion in Christ if they become heterosexuals. They must convert and submit themselves to the ruling regime of heterosexism — a belief system and practice based on the idea that opposite-sex attraction and relationship is natural, normal and superior — for them to be accepted in the communion of saints and sinners.

In our churches, LGBTQIA+ members are not loved as much as God wants us to love one another (just as God loves all of us), and they are not welcomed as much as Christ has welcomed all of us. Our ecclesiastical life has been rather defined by a belief system that does injustice to the “least among us.”<sup>7</sup> In our lukewarm tolerance and conditional welcome, we perpetuate gender injustice against them in our churches where unconditional welcome and abundant love should reign.

In the Philippines, as in many Asian countries, we live with the reality of gender differences in matters of sexual orientation and preferences, roles and biology. These differences are turned into justifications and bases for marginalizing, dominating, demonizing and inflicting violence on those who are different. How many lives have been claimed by violence against cis women and transwomen? How many gay men have been killed because they are hated and “sent to hell” even before their time? Gender issues are life-and-death concerns for many. Consequently, these are justice issues that all humanity should be concerned about.

## **The Spiritual Witness of the Church in These Critical Times**

Our declaration of loyalty and confession of our sins cannot be complete

without the incarnation of our faith. We are members of the Body of Christ called to love and serve a hurting world. Each one of us is called to proclaim that God's love is for all people without exception and condition. We proclaim this love without reserve.

Thus, in the same way with Paul and the early church, we contribute to the mission and ministry of Lord Jesus Christ in the here and now. For the UCCP, education on human sexuality in our congregations can be an opportunity to put our faith into action and to be faithful to the mandate of our Church. The UCCP shall remain a progressive and prophetic church and thus will continue to work for inclusive justice and generous welcome and not mere tolerance of LGBTQIA+ people. It will do so by taking the following steps:

1. Reiterate the creation Sex-Gender Desk at the National Office to oversee the implementation of the Gender Justice Program at the jurisdictional and conferences level. The Desk shall implement the overall intent and spirit of the program: design study materials on human sexuality, facilitate training programs, forge networks with other like-minded cause-oriented groups and facilitate discussion and dialogue with other people of faith on gender justice.
2. Assign a Gender Justice Sunday in the ecclesiastical and liturgical calendar to encourage discussions regarding sexuality and spirituality through liturgy, preaching and teaching church ministries.
3. Support the Union Theological Seminary's Center for Gender and Sexuality and Silliman University Divinity School's Center for Theological and Biblical Studies on Human Sexualities in their work to provide more materials on queer theology. Encourage all other ministerial formation centres and affiliated schools and institutions of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines to establish an office or program that seeks to advance gender justice.

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- <sup>1</sup> Psalm 22, Mark 15:34, Matthew 27:46 (New Revised Standard Version).
- <sup>2</sup> Micah 6:8 (New Revised Standard Version).
- <sup>3</sup> Galatians 6:28 (New Revised Standard Version).
- <sup>4</sup> United Church of Christ in the Philippines, UCCP Constitution article II, s. 8. Available at <https://uccphilippines.wordpress.com/uccp-statement-of-faith/declaration-of-principles>.
- <sup>5</sup> United Church of Christ in the Philippines, “Declaration of Principles,” section 11.
- <sup>6</sup> John 3:16 (New Revised Standard Version).
- <sup>7</sup> Luke 9:48, Matthew 25:40 (New Revised Standard Version).



# SECTION THREE

SOME GLOBAL NORTH EXPERIENCES



# **Intimate Convictions: Journey to the Future – 1998 to 2020**

*Rev. Michael Blair*

The United Church of Canada is sometimes referred to as the church with the soul of the nation. It grew up with the emerging nation building of Canada. So, it is a church that is deeply imbedded in the soil of the nation. It is a church that is a part of the social gospel movement, and so it has historically been committed to the transformation of the social order. Some may say the Christianization of the social order, and from that perspective, it has made some mistakes; for example, its participation in the genocide of Indigenous Peoples. At the same time, it has learned from its mistakes and has tried in its inner life to model some of the changes it wanted to see in society. For example, it was the first church to ordain women in 1936. In 1929, women were declared “persons” under Canadian law. It has since offered two apologies to the Indigenous Peoples in Canada, and in November 2020 offered an apology to young unwed women who were forced to give up their babies for adoption in maternity homes run by the Church. And the United Church has engaged in a process to consider an apology to the LGBTQI2S community.

The Church has also been part of the founding membership of many Canadian and global ecumenical initiatives such as the World Council of Churches, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, and The Canadian Council of Churches, to name a few. All that to say, the church has a strong and valued reputation, is often seen as a leader, and has not been afraid to offer that leadership, often walking a lonely path in doing so.

Since 1988, The United Church of Canada, through a decision on “membership and ministry,” has declared that sexual orientation is not an impediment to membership, and that all members of the Church are eligible to be considered for ordered ministry. Gender identity was added to this in 2009.

For more than 20 years, this decision set the Church apart from other mainline and evangelical denominations within Canada and around the world. It was not an easy decision to make: people were appointed to be delegates to the General Council with the expressed instruction to vote against any decision to allow LGBT(Q) individuals to serve in ministry. At the meeting in 1988, the decision split families and congregations. Many individuals left the church. Yet those who made the decision knew it was the right thing to do.

Because of the way the Church is structured, with the General Council being the highest council, not every part of the Church necessarily follows the direction of the Church. For example, in 2005, although the Church approved equal marriage, it was left up to individual congregations to decide whether to perform marriages.

The decision in 1988 did not come about unexpectedly. It began its journey toward the full inclusion of LGBTQ persons in the life and ministry of the Church through the lens of human rights. The scandal of a teacher losing his job because of his intimate relationship became the formal catalyst for the Church's engagement. Over the years, in addition to an examination of its understanding of scripture and its theological affirmations, the United Church has used a human rights framework to address issues of LGBTQ rights and freedoms.

Several factors contributed to the process:

1. Clarification of decision-making: The Church used what is known as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral (scripture, tradition, experience and reason) as an interpretative tool. The perspective on how to interpret scripture was critical to the Church's decision. In most jurisdictions where the Church is opposed to the full inclusion of all persons, this opposition is due to a literal rather than a contextual interpretation of scripture.
2. Storytelling: Members of the LGBTQ community and their allies were strategic in simply sharing their stories in non-defensive ways. These stories had a significant impact, as there was person-to-person interaction.
3. Internal advocacy: In 2012, the Church elected its first openly gay married Moderator; in 2015, it elected a married lesbian Moderator; and in 2020, it appointed its first openly gay General Secretary.

It is important to note that the separation of church and state is more clearly defined in Canada than in the Caribbean. Canadian politicians do not fear the church in the same way that Caribbean governments do.

Recall Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's famous 1967 statement: "There's no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation."

A significant part of the process for the Church was addressing the question of its colonial history and practices.

In 1969, Canada decriminalized homosexuality.

The United Church understands how churches and religious and faith communities are a significant obstacle to the fullness of life for all people. Thus, the Church has endeavoured to support faith communities as they seek to dismantle systemic barriers and create spaces to support the fullness of life. Over the past few years, The United Church of Canada has done the following:

- Organized regional meetings with church partners, to help them begin to understand the reality and experience of LGBTQ persons and to help them strategize on how to advocate for the basic human rights of individuals.
- Supported National Council of Churches in India, the Philippines and Korea in their efforts to encourage its member communions to open their imagination to biblical foundation to be welcoming and inclusive and to dismantle any attempt by religious communities to encourage

governments to violate basic human rights.

- Had conversations with the leadership of the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas, and The United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands about their support of anti-buggery laws. This is an ongoing process.
- Provided funding to the All Africa Theological Education by Extension program to support the reworking of curriculum to encourage a more contextual reading of scripture in order to support practices of inclusion.

These are a few of the Church's initiatives to create a culture of inclusion around the globe.

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# **LGBTQ2+ in Canada: The Movement for Equality**

*Brent Hawkes*

My experience with the interface between LGBTQ2+ human rights and religion goes back to 1976, when I first moved to Toronto. I started working at the Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto (MCC Toronto) and became the church's liaison to the LGBTI human rights movement.

It was very clear that for the LGBTQ2+ community, religious opposition was the enemy, and the broad religious community was mobilized to prevent any advancement to LGBTQ2+ human rights or inclusion. MCC Toronto and a few other religious leaders from the United Church of Canada and from some affinity groups from other denominations stood in between the two dichotomies.

What we experienced back then is very common to what we hear around the world, that the main opposition to LGBTQ2+ inclusion is religion-based homophobia and transphobia. It was also clear that whenever any argument was presented as God versus gays we would lose.

So it became my job and the job of MCC Toronto to present the case for religious support for LGBTQ2+ human rights and inclusion and to counter the attacks based on religious beliefs. The challenge was that there was very little support in the broader religious community, and the lack of awareness and discussion around basic human sexuality meant that many misconceptions and false narratives were being used.

The media became a crucial ally in terms of countering the misconceptions. We used a variety of approaches, including being very visibly present in debates, protests and submissions to governmental bodies; mobilizing support through petitions and press conferences (particularly profiling allies); and attempting to strongly make the case that many people of faith supported LGBTQ2+ human rights and inclusion, and those seeking to deny human rights were not representative of everyone in their faith traditions.

Initially, support was gathered from within the Christian communities, then Jewish communities, and ultimately Muslim and other faith communities.

Often, LGBTQ2+ communities necessarily put substantial resources into countering religious attacks and too often failed to also proactively build and promote religious support. It is crucial in the good times to be building that support so that it is there in the difficult times.

Promoting religious support is very effective in changing hearts and minds. We need to build the support rather than just react to the religious attack.

Over time, an increasing number of faith leaders joined our movement for equality. Whereas initially it consisted of predominantly retired clergy, eventu-



ally more and more active clergy began to speak out on our behalf. At first, the LGBTQ2+ community leadership were hostile to the inclusion of LGBTQ2+ people of faith in the movement. Eventually, they moved from skepticism to ultimately seeing the value of our not only being included but also playing a leadership role.

Political leaders, especially supportive ones, often felt under attack by the more right-wing religious elements, and they didn't have the language to counter the religious arguments. A very effective strategy was to develop petitions of religious leaders in support of LGBTQ2+ human rights, so that politicians could use those supportive petitions to counter negative religious arguments. It was obvious that a religious attack required a religious response, and so it was our job to mobilize that response again and again.

Ultimately the religious support for inclusion was viewed to be the mainstream and the opposition viewed as a fringe element.

Numerous times politicians would say that it was our mobilizing of support that made it possible for them to vote on legislation for inclusion. And increasingly, the media would turn to LGBTQ2+ people of faith for comments rather than exclusively reaching out to secular LGBTQ2+ leaders. This further broke down the argument of God vs. gays.

Helping LGBTQ2+ people of faith to be effective media communicators is crucial for shifting public opinion and for gaining the trust of the media. Another particularly effective strategy was to engage the most extreme opposition voices because the public, once they heard those extreme points of view, moved in favour of our position.

The current situation in Canada is that the United Church and Presbyterian church have voted for full inclusion. The Lutheran church and segments of the Anglican church are also pushing for inclusion, and there appears to be increasing support in more evangelical Christian communities. Young evangelicals in North America no longer care about homosexuality or abortion. They care about the environment and poverty.

We've also seen significant support come from liberal rabbis, Reform Judaism and even the Jewish Conservatives. There is also a very vocal and visible number of leaders within the Muslim faith who are speaking out for inclusion.

The public opinion polls in Canada have consistently shown us that one of the most supportive segments of society are Roman Catholics. Here I refer to the people and not the hierarchy. The first province in Canada to include sexual orientation in the human rights code was Quebec, the most Catholic province. The first state in the U.S. to give equal marriage was Massachusetts, the most Catholic state. And most of the first countries in Europe to give protections to LGBTQ2+ people and to support equal marriage were Catholic countries. The challenge is

that while Roman Catholic people have consistently shown so much support, the hierarchy has often shown significant opposition.

I've started a new organization, Rainbow Faith and Freedom (RFF), to confront and decrease religious-based homophobia in Canada and around the world, so that families and faith communities can be safer. We'll do that by changing hearts and minds.

I just wanted to give you some background on how RFF came about.

In 2015, I took a three-month sabbatical from MCC Toronto and focused on global LGBTQ2+ human rights. I visited over 10 LGBTI international organizations, allied organizations and numerous individual activists in New York, Washington and Geneva, including ILGA World – the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, Human Rights Watch, ARC International, the World Council of Churches, the Global Justice Institute, the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, the Council for Global Equality, Soulforce, Center for Social and Information Initiatives Action, and the European Forum of LGBT Christian Groups.

I looked at the shape of LGBTQ2+ rights internationally, especially related to religious-based LGBTQ2+ discrimination. I discovered that most international LGBTQ2+ groups are secular and not addressing religious-based discrimination. I constantly asked if these organizations were proudly secular, and the response was usually yes. I followed up with a question about whether they were involved with LGBTQ2+ Christians, Muslims or Jews in the struggle for human rights.

The answer was usually no.

I then outlined my plan to start an international organization to combat religious-based LGBTQ2+ discrimination by changing hearts and minds. I asked if they would work with me and this new organization, and I received overwhelming support.

In 2018, I formed and led a steering committee that drafted the vision, mission, three key pillars and manifesto for the organization. RFF is a registered non-profit organization, and we have applied for charitable status. [Note that this application was approved after the conference and RFF is now a registered charity.] We now have a board of directors, several teams and partnerships with various organizations, including Global Justice Institute, Egale Canada Human Rights Trust, The Commonwealth Equality Network and GIN-SSOGIE (Global Interfaith Network for People of All Sexes, Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities and Expressions).

Our Canadian Pillar will transform equality in law into equality in practice through focused engagement with different sectors and institutions, such as faith-based organizations, health care settings and educational environments, which commonly perpetuate religious-based discrimination of LGBTQ2+ people.

Our Resource Pillar will offer multi-faith resources through an online portal to help drive community awareness, increase access to information, encourage inclusivity and facilitate progressive social change for people and communities both in Canada and abroad.

Our International Pillar will be based on a 20-year strategic plan in which RFF will partner with activists and organizations in selected countries to eliminate religious-based discrimination and establish full inclusion and equality for LGBTQ2+ people.

More than 70 countries in the world still criminalize same-sex intimacy, and in 10 of those countries, LGBTQ2+ people can be executed.

Religion got us into the mess, and religion needs to get us out of it. Thank you.

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*Rev. Dr. Brent Hawkes, C.M., is the Founder and Executive Director of Rainbow Faith and Freedom, and Senior Pastor Emeritus of Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto, where he was at the forefront of ministry to the LGBTQ2+ community for over 40 years. On January 14, 2001, he officiated at the first legal same-sex marriages in the world. He received the Order of Canada, the Order of New Brunswick and three honorary degrees for his stand on social justice and human rights within the LGBTQ2+ communities.*

## Afterword

*Richard Elliott*

There are still nearly 70 countries around the world in which same-sex intimacy is criminalized. Millions of LGBTQ+ people live in fear and in hiding, simply because of who they are. For too long, religion and “tradition” have been used to justify these homophobic laws — and there is something particularly perverse about defending these as part of national identity and culture even after independence from the colonial power that originally imposed such religion and laws. Thankfully, this is beginning to change in some regions, but there are many more where change is slow.

This is why conversations like the ones at *Intimate Conviction 2: Continuing the Decriminalization Dialogue* are so important. We must keep up the dialogue until the human rights of LGBTQ+ people are respected globally. Laws must be changed to ensure that all people are able to live freely and openly, secure in their sexuality and their gender identities, without fear of discrimination, violence, and persecution. The religious beliefs of some — which are even themselves contested within a given faith tradition — must never dictate the law of the land and thereby deny the human rights of others.

But more than this, in the case of those inclined to invoke religious injunctions to “justify” infringing others’ freedom, it is important and necessary to explore other reasonable interpretations of their own tradition’s texts, interpretations in keeping with own tradition’s teachings emphasizing the values of love, respect, charity and dignity for all. In this way, there is some hope to appeal to the better angels of their nature, and to add to the growing numbers of people, of many faiths, who support an end to the criminalization and persecution of people based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.

We are grateful to all those who participated in the conference, those who logged in to join us, and those of you who are now reading and using this volume to advocate for equal rights for all. The work to overcome homophobia and transphobia, to put an end to unjust laws and to violence, is a long one and all can and should play a part. But we shall overcome.

Richard Elliott  
Executive Director  
HIV Legal Network

# APPENDICES



## **Antilles Episcopal Conference Statement on Homosexuality and Homosexual Behavior**

The contemporary political pressures to change legislation in order to decriminalize consensual homosexual activity are now present in the Caribbean Region. The discussions, already quite emotional, have raised two major issues for the Catholic Church. The first issue is that the people must understand the doctrinal/moral teaching of the Church on homosexuality. The second issue is that, in the context of the discussion to change legislation, the teaching of the Catholic Church on homosexuality must be communicated clearly, accurately and continually by the Church to the Caribbean Region.

Both issues are very important for the teaching mission of the Church, for the quality of life in society and for the pastoral care of homosexual people. Because of the experience of the Church following decisions, whether legislative or judicial, regarding policies on issues concerning life, the Church is keenly aware of the need for clear communication. Why? Because, unfortunately, sincere but uninformed people tend to operate on the assumption that what is legal is also moral. Consequently, the Church must publicly confront the educative dimensions of legislation and judicial decision in a respectful but thorough manner in the public forum.

We, the Bishops of the Antilles Episcopal Conference, are very aware of our obligation to offer guidance on doctrinal and ethical matters to the Catholic Community and to invite all people to consider Catholic Teaching, which is rooted in both revelation and in human reason. The Church must proclaim the truth no matter how strongly political pressure, public opinion and/or public morals oppose it.<sup>1</sup>

### **Catholic Teaching on Homosexuality**

#### *Biblical/Doctrinal*

The Catholic Teaching on homosexuality has its foundation in the Church's understanding of the Natural Law, and in the theology of creation found in the book of Genesis. God created the human person in his image and likeness. In the complementarity of the sexes, God's people are called to reflect the inner unity of God and, by a mutual gift of self to the other, to become collaborators with God in the transmission of life. With original sin there was a loss of awareness of the covenantal character of the union of people with God and with each other. While the spousal nature of the human body continued to be the biblical teaching, its appreciation was clouded by sin.<sup>2</sup>

There is an obvious consistency in Old Testament and New Testament salvation history about the moral unacceptability of homosexual relations. The biblical

testimony can be found in Genesis 19, 1-11; Romans 1,18-32; I Corinthians 6, 9; I Timothy, 1, 10. The Church, ever faithful to the data of revelation, teaches that these texts communicate immutable moral principles. The Church has consistently taught that even heterosexual union is only legitimate when a community of life has been established between the man and woman in marriage.<sup>3</sup> The teaching of the Church on marriage has a clarifying application to the issue of homosexuality. Since homosexual relations cannot reflect the complementarity of the sexes intended by God and openness to the transmission of life, they are contrary to the creative designs of God. A person who engages in homosexual behavior acts immorally.<sup>4</sup> The Catholic tradition teaches that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered. Under no circumstances can they be approved.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Moral/Pastoral*

The moral/pastoral dimensions of Catholic Teaching on homosexuality are, of course, rooted in the biblical/doctrinal teaching of the Church. The Church has always made a clear distinction between sexual orientation and sexual behavior. Sexual orientation is morally indifferent while homosexual behavior is immoral, objectively speaking. Although some, possibly many, of those who are trying to have the homosexual behaviour accepted as though it were not disordered are subjectively sincere, the moral theology of the Church has consistently taught that morality does not depend solely on the intentions of the person. The nature of the act must be considered. Homosexual acts do not conform to the truth about the human person. They are contrary to the creative plan of God about the complementarity of the sexes or to the openness to life intrinsic to sexual relations within marriage. While the subjective capacity of an individual may reduce or even eliminate moral culpability, the moral nature of the action does not and cannot change.<sup>6</sup>

While the Church is obliged to preach the truth, it is also obliged by the love of Christ to provide quality pastoral care to persons who have a homosexual orientation and who may be struggling with homosexual behavior. The Church understands the intensity of the struggle many homosexual people experience and also the psychology of compulsive behavior which, at times, is applicable in individual cases.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the Church encourages prayer, a full sacramental life, offers spiritual direction, counseling and support to homosexual persons as they journey through life. It educates parents who also struggle when they discover one or more of their children are homosexual.<sup>8</sup>

Discussions on proposed changes in legal norms regarding homosexuality, whether by legislation or judicial decision, can be highly emotional especially in terms of discrimination and violence against homosexual persons. The Church has condemned, authoritatively, discrimination and violence against all people including homosexuals.<sup>9</sup> Many are opposed to decriminalizing adult consensual



homosexual activity because they are convinced that a not so subtle agenda is operative in international society — an agenda which is trying to make the homosexual lifestyle a valid life option to heterosexual union in marriage. Society must process all aspects of the debate but without discrimination or violence. **No matter how the debate on decriminalizing adult consensual homosexual activity ends, the teaching of the Church will remain unchanged and the pastoral outreach of the Church will continue to manifest the reconciling love of the Lord.**<sup>10</sup>

We, the Bishops of the Antilles Episcopal Conference, respectfully offer this Statement on Homosexuality and Homosexual Behavior for prayerful reflection.

Signed:

Most Rev. Edgerton R. Clarke, Archbishop of Kingston in Jamaica, President

Most Rev. Lawrence Burke, S.J., Nassau, Vice-President

Most Rev. Kelvin Felix, Castries

Most Rev. Edward Gilbert, C.Ss.R., Port of Spain

Most Rev. Paul M. Boyle, S.J., Mandeville

Most Rev. Kevin Britt, Auxiliary (Detroit)

Most Rev. Sydney Charles, St George's

*Missio sui iuris* of the Cayman Islands

Most Rev. Charles Dufour, Montego Bay

Most Rev. Malcolm Galt, C.S.Sp., Bridgetown

Most Rev. Robert Kurtz, C.R., Hamilton

Most Rev. Donald Reece, St John's-Basseterre

Most Rev. Robert Rivas, O.P., Kingstown

Most Rev. Luis Secco, Coadjutor, Willemstad

Most Rev. Louis Sankale, Cayenne

Most Rev. Benedict Singh, S.J., Georgetown

Most Rev. Aloysius Zichem, C.Ss.R., Paramaribo

Most Rev. Samuel Carter, S.J., Archbishop *emeritus*, Kingston in Jamaica.

Edinboro, St Vincent.

May 11, 2001

- <sup>1</sup> Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics,” December 29, 1975, Section V. Hereinafter cited (CDF, 1975).
- <sup>2</sup> Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons,” October 1, 1986, N. 5. Hereinafter cited (CDF 1986).
- <sup>3</sup> CDF, 1975, Section VII
- <sup>4</sup> CDF 1986, N. 6.
- <sup>5</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, N 2357
- <sup>6</sup> CDF, 1975, Section VIII
- <sup>7</sup> National Catholic Bioethics Center, Proceedings from the 17th Workshop for Bishops, “Addiction and Compulsive Behavior,” November 21, 2000, pages 225-238 - Homosexuality and Compulsion.
- <sup>8</sup> National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Committee on Marriage and Family, “Always Our Children,” September 10, 1997
- <sup>9</sup> CDF 1986, N. 10
- <sup>10</sup> Communication of Church Teaching

The communication of the Church’s teaching on homosexuality and homosexual behavior is very important because of the powerful educative dimensions of legislation and judicial decision and the ability of the media to undermine truth by trivializing the sacred.

While the communications capacity of the Church may not be able to match that of secularized society and its media outreach, it is still formidable. The Church must learn from the debate on life issues and use its substantial infrastructure to alert people to the real issues in the discussion about homosexual behavior. It must educate people to the truth component in contemporary debates and share the wisdom of the Catholic Tradition in every possible way. However, the communication must be accomplished with gentleness and respect because the ministry of the Church is fundamentally about bringing the salvation offered by Jesus Christ to all people but especially to those who feel abandoned and rejected.

## **AEC Statement on Marriage: A Covenant Between a Man and a Woman**

### **Introduction**

We, the Bishops of the Antilles Episcopal Conference, joyfully greet the faithful of all the various Arch/Dioceses of the Antilles Episcopal Conference with the words of the risen Christ addressed to his apostles: “Peace be with you!” [John 20:21].

Following on from the 2014’s Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, in 2015, the Holy Father, Pope Francis will convene a Synod of Bishops in Rome to study and reflect upon the reality and importance of the family. To that end, we, your bishops, wish to make clear the Church’s teaching on the nature of marriage and the family in God’s plan. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches: “Marriage and the family are ordered to the good of the spouses and to the procreation and education of children...A man and a woman united in marriage, together with their children, form a family” [CCC # 2201 & # 2202].

The holy institution of marriage thus understood is the very cell of society and Church life. We, therefore, commend and salute those who espouse this noble vocation which is beautiful and at the same time inspirational when lived faithfully, in spite of difficulties and hardship encountered because of its self-sacrificing nature. For that reason, Vatican Council II reminds us thus: “Christ our Lord has abundantly blessed this love, which is rich in its divine love and modelled on Christ’s own union with the Church” [Church in the Modern World, #48]. We pray that married couples will never tire witnessing to their being “a union of loves in the service of life.” Indeed, this is a lifestyle worthy of praise and our whole-hearted support!

We wish to reach out to our brothers and sisters who espouse a lifestyle that is contrary to the divine teaching proclaimed by the Church from time immemorial. As your bishops we wish to affirm that you are loved and blessed by God with many gifts and talents which have enriched both Church and society.

We also admit that we cannot begin to appreciate fully the extent of the pain, anguish and trials that you daily undergo, especially within the atmosphere that is prevalent in the Caribbean. Like Pope Francis, we, too, sincerely hope that you — like us — will seek to know and love personally the will of God who embraces all his children, without exception, with a love that surpasses all understanding.

## **The Love of God.**

This is the basis of God's laws and commandments which have as their objective the total fulfilment or happiness of persons. The Church recognises the fact that God always reveals his designs for his creatures which are made in the very image of God [Gen.1: 27]. When we begin to fathom the beauty of this teaching and how it impacts upon people's situation, it leads us to consider two aspects of God's revelation: Creation which determines the law of nature; Redemption or re-creation which pertains to the divine positive law consonant with the salvation and glorification of humanity.

## **Creation [Law of Nature].**

It is evident from the species created that there is some set order that regulates and furthers the on-going creation set in motion by God, the Creator. Both inanimate and animate beings are regulated by a certain design that is enshrined in the very act of creation [cf. Gen. 1: 11-12; 24-25]. Of interest is the fact that all are created according to their kind. Most importantly, "God created man in his image; in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27). They are created to complement one another and are explicitly directed to multiply and care for the earth [cf. Gen. 1:28]. For believers — be they Jewish, Christian or Muslim — this creation story undergirds the essence of marriage and the family.

## **Redemption [Divine Positive Law].**

The Ten Commandments are the basics of the divine law, the objective of which is proper relationships with God and with fellow human beings. The Saviour sums up the Decalogue under the Great Commandment: love God and love neighbour [cf. Dt. 6: 4-5; Lev. 19: 17], all of which culminates in the redemptive death and resurrection of Jesus, which ushers in a new life welling up into eternal life. This Great Love Story of salvation could be considered as God embracing all of humanity with an everlasting love. Dare we say that married love between man and woman reflects this beautiful union?

By his saving death and glorious resurrection, Jesus has liberated mankind from the innumerable burden of laws and regulations which were meant to safeguard God's covenanted relationship with mankind. However, in no way was license intended, as St. Paul reminds the early Church: "After all, brothers, you were called to be free; do not use your freedom as an opening for self-indulgence, but be servants to one another in love, [Gal. 5:13]. Clearly St. Paul gives us an indication of our relationships with one another, a relationship that is based on love that is Christ-related.

## **The Gender Debate.**

Having established ever so briefly the context, within which Christians should conduct themselves, be they married or single, we wish to comment on the topical issue of gender. It must be clearly established that all human beings, be they male or female, young or old, are endowed with inalienable rights, but rights, however, that must not infringe upon the rights of other human beings nor undermine the common good of society. What are some of those rights? The right to freedom of expression, right to freedom of religion, right to marry and to have a family, the right to an education, health care, housing, and employment. Without such rights life would not be worth living!

To sum up, then, the right to life is the most fundamental of all rights; all others are predicated on that right to life that ensures the integrity of one's dignity which is imparted neither by Church nor State, but by God, the Creator. Each person, male or female, is equal in the pursuit of those rights that ensure fulfilment of one's potential, but it must be remembered that with rights come responsibilities. For Christians, such responsibilities entail their relationship with God, and are expressed by acts of reverence, respect, and acceptance of God's will which is enshrined both in natural and divine positive laws. No one has a right to contravene natural and divine laws. Doing so leads to our peril and the determination of family life and society.

## **Marriage as Covenant between Man and Woman.**

Within the wider context of gender, we return to the question of Marriage. We do so because world-wide there is much discussion with a view to altering the age-old tradition of this far-reaching relationship that affects the very existence of the human race, civil society, and the Church. Marriage between one man and one woman is not only a Christian institution. It is also pre-Christian and is recognised as the ideal means and context whereby children are raised with love that is both masculine and feminine [to correspond to the masculinity and femininity of each person], and educated for their rightful role in the society. Christ himself recognised and raised this complementary union of man and woman to the level of a sacrament — not just as a contract but a covenant. We never tire to reflect on this marital union as one that signifies the great mystery of covenanted union of Christ and his Church [cf. Eph. 5: 21-33].

## **Same-Sex Union**

One of the “rights” being promulgated aggressively today in our Caribbean Region is the union between persons of the same gender. Notwithstanding our age-old tradition of marriage that ensures the propagation of the human race and the promulgation of our civilisation and culture, same-sex union is being pro-

moted by very powerful forces, as a “civil right” and an alternative form of “marriage.” In reality “Legal recognition of homosexual unions or placing them on the same level as marriage would mean not only the approval of deviant behaviour, with the consequence of making it a model in present-day society but would obscure basic values which belong to the common inheritance of humanity. The Church cannot fail to defend these values, for the good of men and women and for the good of society itself.”<sup>21</sup>

Given the fact that assets are jointly owned by persons espousing such a union, the Church recognizes the justice issue thus entailed. Nonetheless, in this regard the Church’s teaching remains clear: “Nor is the argument valid according to which legal recognition of homosexual unions is necessary to avoid situations in which cohabiting homosexual persons, simply because they live together, might be deprived of real recognition of their rights as persons and citizens. In reality, they can always make use of the provisions of law — like all citizens from the standpoint of their private autonomy — to protect their rights in matters of common interest. It would be gravely unjust to sacrifice the common good and just laws on the family in order to protect personal goods that can and must be guaranteed in ways that do not harm the body of society.”<sup>22</sup>

### **The Mission of the Church.**

Does that mean that the Church is not concerned about men and women having such an orientation? Of course not! The Church’s role is to proclaim the Truth, “in season, out of season” [2 Tim. 4:2] to each and every person who would listen to the Word of God being proclaimed. It is that proclamation received in faith that will bring about a deeper understanding of the Truth that the Holy Spirit wishes to impart to every human being in the quest of happiness and peace. Hopefully that deeper understanding will lead to a true encounter with Christ for all of us so that we see in each other brothers and sisters on the way to Christ. However, when people make choices for lifestyles contrary to the gospel, the Church must be full of mercy, slow to judge; rather she proclaims “in season, out of season,” the love and compassion of the Good Shepherd who tenderly seeks out the stray sheep and says to one and all: “Come to me all who are weary and burdened” [Matt. 11:28].

Therefore, in imitation of the Good Shepherd, the Church must care for all human beings and love them. All are God’s creatures “made in the image of God.” To that end, the Church teaches regarding homosexual, bisexual and transsexual orientations: “They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfil God’s will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord’s Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition” [CCC, #2358].

The mission of the Church is clearly defined: “Go into the whole world and proclaim the Good News, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” [Matt. 28:19-20a]. That’s the Church’s mandate to proclaim the Good News of salvation!

Therefore, we appeal to our Catholic faithful to stand firm in the faith handed on to us by the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church impelled by and committed to the teaching and mission of Jesus. We also strongly urge that all will respect those brothers and sisters of ours who admit to having an orientation different from the majority of our people. We must respect them, do no violence to them, and respect their basic human rights, for they, along with us, are made in the image and likeness of God.

Respect for others, however, does not imply approval of the life styles contrary to the traditional ones, even if and when the State were to decriminalise the anti-buggery law, always bearing in mind that legality does not make a thing moral. Our duty, under all circumstances, is to express love and concern as we remain firm in the faith of our Fathers fostered and maintained by God’s Holy Spirit.

“Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with every good that you may do his will, working in you that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen” [Heb. 13: 20 – 21].

Yours faithfully in Christ,  
Bishops of the Antilles Episcopal Conference  
April 25, 2015

- <sup>1</sup> *Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons*, Guidelines from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2003, Section 11.
- <sup>2</sup> *Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons*, Guidelines from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2003, Section 9.

## AEC Statistics

Country	Diocese	Sq. ml.	Sq. km.	Population	Catholics	
Guyana	Georgetown	83,000	214,969	750,000	8.1%	60,750
Suriname	Paramaribo	63,250	163,820	492,829	22.8%	112,365
French Guiana	Cayenne	32,253	83,534	300,000	66%	198,000
Belize	Belize City and Belmopan	8,020	22,966	301,270	49.6%	149,430
Bahamas	Nassau	5,383	13,943	330,549	13.5%	44,624
Jamaica		4,244	10,991	2,528,000	3.8%	96,064
	Kingston					75,864
	Montego Bay	1,500	3,885	723,200	2%	13,200
	Mandeville	1,282		484,000	1.4%	7,000
T&T	Port of Spain	1,980	5,130	1,262,366	29.4%	371,136
Guadeloupe	Basse-terre	630	1,630	320,017	95%	304,016
Martinique	St. Pierre and Fort de France	436	1,128	360,000	87%	313,200
Dominica	Roseau	290	751	75,705	70.0%	52,994
St. Lucia	Castries	238	616	150,000	86.7%	130,050
Curaçao	Willemstad	171	444	141,766	85%	120,501
Aruba		69	179	101,484	80.8%	81,999
Bonaire		113	292	21,000		
Antigua	St. John's	108	281	87,000	10.0%	
Barbados	Bridgetown	170	430	247,288	4.41%	10,905
St. Vincent & G	Kingstown	150	389	110,000	10.0%	11,000
Grenada	St. Georges	133	344	91,158	53%	48,314
Bermuda	Hamilton	21	54	63,023	15%	9,453
Cayman				60,000	12.5%	7,500
				<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>9,000,655</b>	<b>2,114,801</b>









*Intimate Conviction 2: Continuing the Decriminalization Dialogue* was an online conference held in November 2020, over the course of three half days. This conference built on the teachings of the first Intimate Conviction gathering in 2017, with a particular emphasis on including voices and perspectives from the global south.

Once again, activists, church officials and politicians from around the world gathered to discuss the role of the Church in maintaining homophobic laws — and how the Church can help to break these down. The conversations that ensued were both enlightening and inspiring, highlighting the work that still needs to be done to ensure that the human rights of LGBTQ+ people around the world are respected, protected and fulfilled. We are pleased to present this volume of some of the presentations from this second conference and we hope that it will be another valuable resource for all those looking to understand why these laws came about and what can be done to change them.

