

Other Voices Other Worlds:
The Global Church Speaks Out on Homosexuality
Terry Brown, Editor

When Terry Brown, Bishop of Malaita and Senior Bishop of the Church of the Province of Melanesia, felt “the shock of the 1998 Lambeth Conference plenary debate and resolution unambiguously declaring any homosexual practice incompatible with Scripture and, therefore, a sin,”¹ he decided to canvass the globe in order to understand the extent to which homosexual practice actually occurs in indigenous cultures and so the Churches planted in those cultures.

Other Voices Other Worlds is a collection of twenty-four essays by writers of stature, some with ecclesiastical responsibility, all thoughtful and filled with compassion. The Anglican Communion and interested others are well served by this book.

Many within as well as outside the Anglican Communion assume the current controversy centered on homosexuality in the Church (specifically the ordination of gay and lesbians and same sex marriage) is a north/south issue. The evidence presented here tells us that the proportion of homosexuals around the world is fairly consistent and that the various communities address the issue of homosexuality according to local expectation, experience, and custom.

In one essay, “Putting Right a Great Wrong: A Southern African Perspective,” John Matshikiza, one of South Africa’s best known journalists is quoted by contributor David Russell, retired Bishop of Grahamstown, Church of the Providence of Southern Africa and former Dean of the Province, as saying, “the gay phenomenon exists everywhere—much to the chagrin of those who would piously claim that being gay is a European-imported disease.”² The real point is that homosexuality is acculturated throughout the world with various levels of acceptance, neglect, or assault.

Other Voices Other Worlds invites the reader into some rarely known worlds. Where else are we to learn that the Lakota, whose leadership happens to be female, speak in two distinct ways—women’s Lakota or slow Lakota, and Men’s Lakota or fast Lakota? In the Lakota culture, if a child expresses gender confusion a family ceremony helps the five- or six-year old choose his orientation. If the boy tends to the feminine, he learns to speak Women’s Lakota. According to Martin Brokenleg, “The gender role for ‘men-who-speak-with-women’s-grammar’ is broadly defined as that of a Lakota woman...A *wi’i’nkte* is defined as different and, as such, sacred.”³

Brokenleg, Director of the Native Ministries and Professor of First Nations Theology at the Vancouver School of Theology, tells us that Christian missionaries had a hard time with Lakota sexuality, both in the natural acceptance of female gender identification by some men and with the notion of several women sharing a man (There were more Lakota women than men, but also women were more valuable than men; this was a practical solution to a social reality).

In Oceania, regarding *Leiti* (men who identify themselves as women)⁴, Winston Halapau, Bishop for Polynesia in New Zealand/Aotearoa writes, "Members of this distinct community are not deprived of their roles in village communal life or of their rights or privileges to contribute their gifts as baptised Christians." Halapau goes on: "Within an Oceanic worldview, the right of belonging embraces people irrespective of sexual orientation."⁵

Aruna Gnanadason, a member of the Church of India who works for the World Council of Churches, proclaims, "The church has for so long tended to ignore the gay and lesbian community, including gays and lesbians in its own body."⁶ The presence of gays and lesbians in the Church of India, however, is undisputed. In India, the struggle for recognition and acceptance is the same justice issue seen else where around the world.

Other Voices Other Worlds offers a rich and varied view of homosexuality throughout the world and in the church. As it does so, it is especially helpful that Muslim ideas about homosexuality are presented. The Qur'an specifically condemns homosexuality and being openly gay or lesbian in an Islamic country is extremely dangerous. Curiously, however, we learn that Turkey, a secular Islamic nation, has no prohibition against the practice. Stuart E. Brown's article "Muslim Attitudes On Homosexuality" is enlightening and provides an important, perhaps easily neglected, context for what happens culturally regarding homosexuality among the Muslim faithful. What we realize is that Christians are blissfully naïve if they insulate themselves on the world stage from Islamic views.

If the Episcopal Church USA is the lightning rod for homosexual issues in the Anglican Communion (along with some dioceses of the Anglican Church in Canada), northern Nigeria is the lightning bolt itself.

Not surprisingly, we learn that Nigeria does, in fact, have gay and lesbian citizens, although there is no mention of Changing Attitude of Nigeria and their leader, Davis Macliyalla, whose group staged a convention of some 800 gay and lesbian church-goers in November of 2005. The plight of homosexuals in Nigeria is, and probably always has been, dismal. Contributor Rowland Jide Macaulay, a pastor with the Metropolitan Community Church, North London, writes regarding Nigeria,

“Traditionally, homosexuality is associated with an evil spirit, a demon that must be cast out of the person.”⁷ Dismal indeed.

Macaulay tells us that “If you are openly gay and profess to be a Christian, this assertion will be seen as a serious commission of sin that cannot be forgiven; homosexuality, as far as the churches in Nigeria are concerned, is an unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit.”⁸ Macaulay further reports that Peter Akinola, Anglican Archbishop of Nigeria’s 25 million member church, argues that homosexuals are lower than beasts.⁹

Macaulay’s essay provides a brief but very useful introduction to the cultural circumstances of Nigeria and the conservative nature of the church. Although Christianity is rapidly growing in the south of the country, it competes head-to-head with Islam in the north. One result is a fundamentalist theological interpretation of Scripture combined with unflinching intolerance (presumably in part to match the Islamic fundamentalism and local tradition). He also tells of the governmental attitude towards homosexuals and the many dangers for homosexuals in Nigeria. After reading the essay, it is not difficult to understand where Archbishop Akinola is coming from, like it or not.

David Russell, the South African, and others point out the all too obvious irony that some in the Church espouse following the Jesus of Scripture while also acting as Christian Pharisees by excluding homosexuals, the modern equivalent of prostitutes and tax collectors, from equality in the church: “While preaching God’s love for all people, the dominant tradition asserts that any and all homosexual practice is sinful.”¹⁰

Humberto Maiztegui, Old Testament professor at Egmont Machado Krischke Seminary in Porto Alegre, Brazil, asks, “What kind of witness are we to be—a witness to exclusion or a witness to inclusion?”¹¹ This is certainly the right question to ask.

Throughout *Other Voices Other Worlds*, many contributors refer to the usual examples of the Church in history as it has changed its apparent fixity when so inspired. It has ever been thus. Russell and Maiztegui both poignantly remind us of Peter’s opposition to Gentiles joining the Church without first submitting to the law. Wasn’t it Paul’s sound reasoning and the Spirit’s presence in Peter’s dream that instigated that dramatic shift in his position, a shift contrary to both Scripture and tradition?

All of the historical and Biblical examples and arguments—Scripture’s legitimization of slavery, its prohibition against divorce and remarriage, and its exclusion of women from the priesthood, etc.—still need to be repeated as modern prophetic voices and *Other Voices Other Worlds* provides that venue in a global context.

On the one hand these essays tell us what we already know. On the other, they offer to those unconvinced yet one more opportunity to consider that Spirit is dynamic and an ever-acting power among us. Which, of course, suggests the time-honored Anglican balancing act on the tightrope of difficult issues. One theme in *Other Voices Other Worlds* is that Scripture and Tradition should not automatically trump Reason. To cite David Russell one more time, "The process of interpreting, questioning and reinterpreting the Scriptures is central to the Scriptures themselves, and was fundamental to their unfolding."¹²

¹ Brown, Terry, Editor, *Other Voices Other Worlds: The Global Church Speaks Out on Homosexuality*, (New York: Church Publishing, Inc., 2006), preface.

² Russell, David, "Putting Right a Great Wrong: A Southern African Perspective," p. 181

³ Brokenleg, Martin, "Lakota Hca," p. 9

⁴ Halapau, Winston, "Moana Waves: Oceania and Homosexuality," p. 27

⁵ Halapau, p. 28

⁶ Gnanadason, Aruna, "The Struggle To Be Human: A Reflection on Homosexuality In India," p. 77

⁷ Macaulay, Rowland Jide, "Homosexuality and the Churches in Nigeria," p. 161

⁸ Macaulay, p. 158

⁹ Macaulay, p. 159

¹⁰ Russell, David, p. 179

¹¹ Maiztegui, Humberto, "Homosexuality and the Bible in the Southern Cone of America," p. 239

¹² Russell, p. 185