

Gay people as missionaries: an interrogation of the silences.

A personal reflection by Kevin Ward for the Listening process of the Anglican Consultative Council.

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A gay presence in mission history?

Any attempt to explore the role of gay and lesbian people in the missionary movement has to confront a number of difficulties. First, until the 1970s few people would have categorised themselves as homosexual, even those we might regard, with hindsight, as gay or lesbian. Having desire directed towards persons of your own gender and labelling oneself as 'homosexual' are two very different things. Moreover even when people were aware of homosexual desire, it is highly unlikely that they would be willing to share those feelings with other missionaries, and least of all with those responsible for their employment (whether mission or church authorities). Mission archives are only likely to leave traces of homosexuality among missionaries when a breakdown of health occurs, which requires medical or psychological attention, or when a breach of the moral code of the mission community came to light which made the fulfilment of the missionary's role problematic. In normal circumstances, the issue of sexual orientation never presented itself to the historical record. A history of the gay contribution to the mission movement is likely to be an interrogation of the silences.

When I was doing my PhD research on Kenyan Protestant Christianity in the 1970s, I heard from a fellow researcher of a 'compromising' letter which she had discovered in a mission archive. A senior missionary had confided to another missionary in another mission, how he had struggled with homosexual feelings. The researcher had drawn the letter to the attention of the archivist, who had withdrawn it from the public domain, though both correspondents had been dead for many years.

In contrast to the silence on sexuality in mission circles, there has been a recognition that there is some connection between the European discovery of 'other worlds' outside Europe (what became the colonial encounter) and 'other worlds' of sexual expression, both heterosexual and homosexual. The exploration of other lands and cultures led to a new awareness of other ethical codes and practices, a questioning of the universality of the sexual morality which had developed in the Christian lands of

the West. For some individual explorers, colonial agents, traders and soldiers, the experience in foreign lands was one of liberation from the sexual norms dictated by their own society. But if the widening of horizons gave opportunity for nonconformist sexual practice as well as a more general intellectual debate in some quarters about the relativity of values, it could also serve to show the necessity of a strict enforcement of conventional morality, and reinforce negative assessments of the cultures of other societies which did not conform to those standards. Particularly for Christian missions, commitment to the value and authority of Christian sexual and family ethics as developed in Christian European societies became part and parcel of the missionary enterprise. The transgressive colonial adventurer, particularly his flouting of the sexual norms of his own society, was a warning to missionaries of the dangers of relaxing standards. It increased the determination to reform and transform the ethical sexual standards of the societies among whom they worked. The success of evangelisation was often measured in the evidence of transformed family lives and sexual practice.

On the other hand, the colonial encounter can itself be understood as a violent sexual intrusion (both in literal and metaphorical terms). The colonised were subject to unwelcome 'desire' on the part of the coloniser, enacted by both individual colonisers with power over the colonial subject, but also by the very experience of living under colonialism. This involved not only the abuse of women for sexual gratification but also the entrapment of women in a colonial economic system. It involved the 'feminisation' of men through their loss of autonomy and dignity in the economic field, as well as their subjection to 'unmanly' sexual roles. In such cases, the relationship between coloniser and colonised was a denial of the humanity of the colonised. This kind of colonial exploitation has been continued in the late 20th century in the burgeoning of 'sexual tourism', at first the preserve of the wealthy, but since the period of cheap student travel and package tours, much more widely available for large sections of the population of the rich North.

Given the tightly controlled ethical discipline practiced by missionary societies, and, even more, the social conventions operating on the mission station, sexual licence can be discounted as a motive for the vast majority of those who became missionaries during the classical period of the missionary movement. Though one has to say that some of the pioneer missionaries were a far remove from conforming to the ideas of respectability which became de rigueur on an established mission station, especially in the period of high colonialism. The explorer Henry Morton Stanley is lauded in Uganda as the one who persuaded Kabaka Muteesa to make his famous appeal for missionaries in 1877. Stanley's one novel *Kamala* is an extraordinary story about the love between two young men from East Africa. In it Stanley celebrated the homosociability which he clearly admired in East African society. Whether he was aware of the pederasty practiced at the court of the Kabaka of Buganda is uncertain. There is no evidence, to my knowledge, of homosexual desire among the bachelor missionaries who first came to Uganda. There is a good deal of evidence that the strict taboo on heterosexual relations which operated in the colonial period could not be enforced in the pioneering period of the mid nineteenth century.

It is nevertheless true that the missionary expectation was always one of the strictest chastity for its agents, and that with the establishment of regular mission stations this

became a reality. Yet it is possible that missionary service has always attracted a disproportionate number of those who felt attracted to same-sex relations. The vocation of a missionary was, in itself, a call to be counter-cultural; to be a nonconformist with respect to one's own society. For those with same-sex desire (however clearly or vaguely experienced), missionary service could be attractive as offering a liberation from the normal expectations of courtship, marriage and family life. There is a parallel here with the role of women in mission. Women, both married and single, were able, as missionaries, to develop professionally in ways which were still denied them in Europe or America. In particular it allowed them to exercise responsible roles, to exercise authority and achieve some level of personal autonomy. In addition, missionary service provided an avenue for women who, for one reason or another, were unable or unwilling to marry. It has also been noted that for men from working and lower middle class backgrounds, missionary service offered opportunities for personal, social and professional advance which would not have been open to them in their native countries.

Missionary service did not have such clear tangible benefits for gay people as it did for women and working class men generally, but it did, nevertheless, offer a life of personal fulfilment in which pressures to conform to the norms of one's own society were less pressing. The argument that gay people found in missionary service an escape from the cultural conventions of western society is ironic for a number of reasons. On the one hand, those who blame the 'west' for the importation of 'homosexuality' into the global south, might have to acknowledge the mission movement itself was one of the channels by which western gay sensibilities were conveyed. On the other hand, those who argue that to accept homosexuals into the life of the church is a capitulation to the modern secular culture, need to be reminded of the fact that both homosexual orientation and missionary vocation have, for long periods, been equally regarded as counter-cultural.

Singleness is not in itself evidence of homosexual orientation. Single women faced many social factors which inhibited them from marriage, including the obligation to look after aging parents, the death of potential partners in war. By and large men did not face these obstacles, and it is therefore reasonable to expect that a larger proportion of male missionaries who decided not to marry did so for reasons connected with their sexuality. But, for both men and women, a missionary career was likely to involve a personal commitment to celibacy. This was a requirement for joining the religious orders of Catholic missions and for some Anglican communities. But for most Anglicans, and for Protestant missions generally, such a personal decision for celibacy did not receive formal recognition. It would be unwise, therefore, to presume that singleness of itself indicates same-sex desire, let alone same-sex activity. In colonial times, mission societies encouraged singleness among probationary missionaries, often forbidding marriage until language exams were passed, or a certain number of years on the field had been accomplished. Until the 1990s, singleness would not have been regarded as unusual or suspect either by the mission or the local church.

The question of 'orientation' simply did not arise, unless it became a matter of public concern. The reluctance to discuss such issues openly reflects both the reticence of the sending country about discussing homosexuality, and the expectations of local

churches that missionaries should embody, seemingly without effort, the sexual code they preached and were requiring of their converts. It was a movement like the East African Revival which punctured the aura of impeccability on the part of the missionary. Incidentally the East African Revival also first drew attention to issues of same sex desire on the part of missionaries and Africans alike: one of the criticisms of the Revival fellowships was that they were unwilling to keep quiet about sins which respectability demanded should not be discussed. Mission records themselves contain only rare cases of married male missionaries accused of homosexual activity, often transgressing not only lines of gender but also of race. But there were, naturally, strenuous efforts in these cases, to limit the damage to the mission's repute, through speedy withdrawal from the mission of the offending member.

For the most part, it was presumed that a missionary was someone who was disciplined and committed in his or her personal life. The missionary vocation provided a relatively safe space for those with same sex desire. Single people were not normally interrogated about their sexuality either by the mission or the church for whom they worked, on the presumption that single people would live a celibate life. Moreover, in so far as the local church was concerned, missionaries often lived in societies where western concepts of 'homosexuality', in particular the recognition of homosexuality as a distinctive form of sexual being as opposed to a particular sexual activity, were relatively undeveloped. A single male missionary was much more likely to be monitored for inappropriate relationships with members of the opposite sex than for any suspicion about his relationships with other men.

This modus operandi no longer operates. First, missionaries are likely to be much more aware of their own sexuality and, if they understand themselves to be homosexual, to want to integrate their sexuality with their sense of personal being. This may lead them to question whether celibacy is the only possible way of life open to them. Non-western churches are now more alert to the issue of homosexuality as it has emerged in western debates, and to see it as incompatible with a Christian morality. The growing levels of intolerance of homosexual identity (quite apart from the question of sexual expression) have made the mission vocation very uncomfortable for single people, and particularly for those who might wish to be honest about their sexuality. The result is likely to be that homosexuals will increasingly feel excluded from missionary service.

Gay contribution to mission

Given that, until fairly recently, mission service was one in which those with same sex desire are likely to have found congenial, how did their homosexuality affect their mission service? It is impossible to generalise about the contribution of missionaries with a homosexual disposition: sexual orientation in itself is no indicator of how good a person will be at their job. Homosexual missionaries demonstrate a variety of skills and attributes. It would be impossible to categorise them as a distinct 'type', demonstrating particular characteristics which differentiate them from the heterosexual majority. Moreover, given the impossibility of distinguishing who was homosexual and who was not for most of the 200 years of the modern missionary movement, it is not even possible to provide an account of specific gay contributions to mission, except to affirm that, from the perspective of the God 'from whom no secrets are hid', there are likely to be many examples of devoted, highly creative and imaginative missionary service by people of gay and lesbian disposition. But it is

possible to affirm, in general terms, that missionaries with a homosexual orientation have played a conspicuous part in the missionary movement over the last 200 or so years: as educationalists, as campaigners for women's rights, as theological educators, as historians and theologians of the mission movement, as activists in the promotion of human rights, not least in the struggle against apartheid, as anthropologists who have promoted understanding of non-western cultures, as liturgists who have entered deeply into the 'soul' of the people among whom they work and have expressed it in hymn and prayer and worship, in art and music.

2007 commemorates the bicentenary of the British abolition of the slave trade, the first major achievement of Evangelicals who believed so strongly in the humanity of all people. Some Christians are uncomfortable with the idea that the contemporary struggle for gay and lesbian rights also identifies with this tradition. But for gay and lesbian Christians there is a clear continuity. The campaign for dignified treatment for sexual minorities is one which the Church is called as a whole to participate in, just as it was a Christian duty to struggle against slavery.

Throughout these two centuries, homosexual missionaries, in ways they could hardly express or even fully understand, knew themselves to be discriminated against and undervalued by their own society. This often gave them a sympathy for others who experienced even harsher and more overt discrimination: a sensitivity to racial intolerance, to the inequalities of colonial rule, to the pervasive undervaluing of women. Of course, simply having a homosexual orientation does not magically create such sensitivity. There are cases of homosexual missionaries who responded in negative ways, their disgust at their own sexuality translating into bitterness and authoritarianism. But there are also examples of gay and lesbian missionaries who used their own self-awareness of their sexuality in positive ways, to enlarge their sympathies and dedicate them to service. Released from conventional family responsibilities, they could develop deep and lasting relations with local people in ways which might be difficult for other missionaries. They could often experiment with new forms of being family, which were obedient to Christ's insight that faith transcends the natural bonds of kith and kin. They were often able to give undivided attention to their work. They excelled as educators. They knew how to listen. They were able to appreciate the depth and sophistication of other cultures. They were in a good position to throw off the inhibitions and rigidities of their own Western culture. In a famous statement to the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference, Bishop Azariah of Dornakal said 'Through all the ages to come the Indian Church will rise up in gratitude to attest the heroism and self-denying labours of the missionary body. You have given your goods to feed the poor. You have given your bodies to be burned. We ask also for *love*. Give us Friends.' It is perhaps in the enhanced ability of single missionaries to offer friendship that their greatest contribution will be vindicated. Clearly it would be fantasy to claim that simply being homosexual in orientation endowed one with those admirable traits. But there is sufficient evidence in the record to honour those whose (hidden) sexual orientation was an important factor in the work for which they are rightly acclaimed. 'Since we are surrounded by such a cloud of witnesses' (Hebrews 12:1).

Towards a theology of gay mission

I have so far concentrated on the sociological issues which may explain the importance of gay people as missionaries. But what about more theological reasons?

Christianity began as a movement which relativised traditional family values. Abraham was called out from his ethnic group and kinsfolk to follow the call of God, which, like missionaries, involved a physical as well as spiritual distance from the home society. Christ called people out from their kindred and family groupings to become his disciples. In 19th century Denmark, Soren Kierkegaard was scathing of a Church which seemed to offer nothing more than the cosiness of family life, the idolatry of the family. The missionary movement as a whole can be seen a response to that challenge, a determination not to put family and marriage above all things. For missionaries with a homosexual orientation this could come as the lifting of a burden – that our worth is not to be defined primarily by our success in marriage and procreation. And yet, the biblical insight ‘It is not good for the human to be alone’ (Genesis 2:18) remains. It is more basic than, and precedes, the injunction to be fruitful and multiply. It is a universal need for human beings. Gay as well as straight need human companionship and love, not in the abstract but in particular relationships. It is one of the miracles of God’s grace that, despite the barriers of racial prejudice, colonial inequality and the hostile gaze of heterosexual society, some gay and lesbian missionaries have found in their encounter with those in other, very different societies from their own, an answer to that basic human quest and longing.

If western societies have, over the last two hundred years, increasingly allowed more space and toleration to alternative sexualities, it has been at the cost of essentialising sexual identity, compelling individuals to identify themselves as gay or straight. The more space gay people were granted, the more sexual identity became an issue of public debate, the more certain people were identified as ‘homosexuals’. The negative aspect of this development was that their condition was often pathologised, seen as a sickness for which a ‘cure’ should be attempted. Churches have often been at the forefront in stigmatising homosexuality. No longer able to ignore the presence of same-sex desire, they were reluctant to endorse what they could no longer deny or effectively outlaw. In the face of the condemnation of society at large, and the church in particular, gay Christians have often felt like Job, forced to defend his integrity and honour against the religious friends who want to convince him that he must be a particularly egregious sinner. Job’s passionate rejection of that judgement culminate in the great outcry in Job 19: ‘I know that my redeemer lives’. This is by no means the calm certainty of resurrection which it has become in Christian piety, but the impassioned anger of a man who demands that he be given his time in court, so that he can defend his integrity and vindicate his righteousness. Job insists that he wants to make his case before God himself, because he is convinced that God will actually vindicate him, that God will provide him with the advocate who will successfully defend him. Gay people know that, even if the entire Christian community despises them, they have an advocate who will not do so – the defender whom Job invokes, the Christ who took our sin upon him on the cross. For many missionary the experience of living in societies where sexuality is not essentialised, where family life is not so narrowly confined, where sexual sin is not considered as the sin against the holy spirit, has been genuinely liberating.

Conclusion

During the present crisis in world Anglicanism it is unlikely that it is yet safe for gay missionaries openly to give witness to why they became missionaries, how they dealt with their sexuality while involved in missionary work, and what they feel their

sexual orientation contributed to the quality of that work. There is a growing body of evidence in private papers and in the memories of those who have worked as missionaries, particularly in the latter half of the 20th century, that gay people have made a significant contribution to the communities among whom they worked and to the furtherance of Christian mission. I hope that one day it will be possible to document and critically analyse this contribution as an historical phenomenon, and to integrate it into theological understandings of the missionary movement.