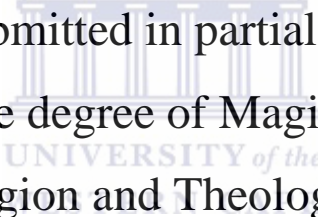


**A Case Study of the Debate on Homosexuality within
the United Methodist Church**

Neusa Marta Pedro Joaquim



A minithesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Magister Theology in the Department of Religion and Theology, University of the Western Cape.

Supervisor: Christo Lombard

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT

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Neusa M.P. Joaquim

Of all the Christian denominations in the United States, the United Methodist Church (UMC) is one of three probably experiencing the greatest amount of conflict over the rights of its members who practice homosexuality. History shows that United Methodists have always maintained a great diversity of opinion on many matters within the Church. Having dealt with its racist and sexist policies in the past, the UMC is now tackling its homophobic beliefs. Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason have been used as tools to deal with this debate, which has become one of the most divisive in the church and society. At present, there are two main positions concerning the debate on homosexuality in the UMC: the rejecting and accepting positions.

Although the UMC - as set forth in its book of discipline - finds the practice of homosexuality incompatible with Christian teaching, its debate on homosexuality seems far from over. First, there is a majority conviction supporting the current position of the church. Second, there is a steadily growing minority conviction that maintains that the responsible practice of homosexuality should be accepted and homosexuals should enter into full membership with the church. Third, the UMC upholds basic human and civil rights. Nonetheless, gays and lesbians are not ordained into the ministry. Fourth, the UMC acknowledges that our human understanding of human sexuality is limited and a combined effort with other sciences will help us understand human sexuality more completely. One can see the church's struggle in search for a Christian sexual ethic. It seems difficult to foresee any form of consensus that could bridge the big differences of opinion and conviction behind the two camps in the struggle: "rejection" of homosexuality (non-punitive) and "full acceptance". They simply do not seem to be compatible, rationally and ethically. It is the task of this mini-thesis to explore the United Methodist Church's struggle in the search for ethical discernment on homosexuality.

DECLARATION

I declare that “*A Case Study of the Debate on Homosexuality within the United Methodist Church*” is my own work, that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged as complete references.

Signed:

Neusa M. P. Joaquim

November 2012



AKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND DEDICATION

UNIVERSITY of the
WESTERN CAPE

I am grateful to God for life and the strength He gives me to move forward and never give up. My gratitude also goes to my parents who have done all they could for my studies. My husband and I very much appreciate the love and kindness received from Professor Lombard, my supervisor, who supported me throughout the writing of this mini-thesis. Words cannot express our gratitude to you. Thank you very much Professor Lombard! My gratitude also goes to the Nkosi family and members of the congregation at Central Methodist Mission in South Africa, for their support and love.

I am indebted to my fellow struggler in faith, a partner in work and companion in life, my husband, Ken Kalala Ndalamba, and to our beautiful son, Emmanuel Joaquim Ndalamba.

This thesis is dedicated to you all - with Love and Care!

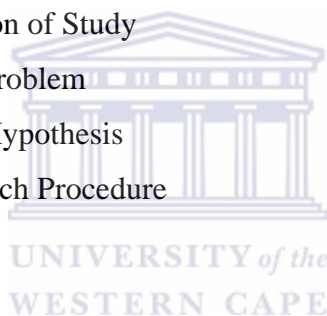
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CHAPTER 1

HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE CHURCH: AN INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Rationale of the study

Homosexuality is known to be the romantic or sexual attraction between people of the same sex. It is a behaviour that is commonly believed to be caused by man's sinful nature, nurture and environment, and personal choice. How important each factor is, though, is an issue that is debated.¹ Such behaviour is said to have existed since thousands of years ago in (almost) every corner of the world. Recent studies have shown that contrary to what some authors thought and wrote in the past, homosexuality exists and has always existed in Africa just like in any other place (Epprecht 2008). However, the polarization and the 'coming out' concepts are believed to be westernized. In the Bible, such behaviour is believed to have been mentioned too. Homosexuality, or at least the "coming out publicly", seems to be becoming more common in recent years - most authors talk of the 1980s - and its acceptance seems to be larger in the Western or developed world than in Africa and Asia. The current fact is that homosexuality is tearing society, and worst of all: the church, apart. Different Christian denominations differ in their opinions for or against homosexuality. The United Methodist Church, like most mainline churches, is against the practice of homosexuality.

The United Methodist Church (UMC) is the largest Methodist denomination with both mainline and evangelical elements. The church is rooted in the lively renewal movement led by John and Charles Wesley in the Church of England. The Wesley brothers were missionaries to the colony of Georgia where they first arrived in 1736. Methodism in America began as a lay movement and it brought about the founding of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1784. After a number of splits and mergers over issues concerning the power of laity in the administration of the church, slavery, gender, racism and the power of bishops in the denomination, the Methodist Church was formed in 1939 as a result of the combination of three churches: the

¹ See <http://www.conservapedia.com/Homosexuality> retrieved in July 21st, 2010 (11h30)

Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church-South and the Methodist Protestant Church. On April 23rd, 1968, in Dallas (Texas), the Evangelical United Brethren Church joined hands with the Methodist Church and formed the United Methodist Church, with the words, “Lord of the Church, we are united in thee, in thy Church and now in The United Methodist church,” (The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2004:9).

At the moment of its creation, the UMC had approximately 11 million members, making it one of the largest protestant churches in the world. Changes have happened in its life and structure since its birth and it has become a world church with members and conferences in Africa, Asia, Europe and the United States. The church has seen a noticeable decline in Europe and USA since 1968; however, in Africa and Asia membership has grown significantly (The Book of Discipline, 2004:19-20). The 2007 statistics of the UMC determined that the church has a worldwide membership of 12 million members: 8 million in the United States of America and 3.5 million in Africa, Asia and Europe. The church is part of the World Council of Churches, World Methodist Council and other religious associations. The General Conference is the official governing body making the church decentralized. However, administratively, the church has a governing structure similar to that of the USA government.²

Of all the Christian denominations in the United States, the United Methodist Church is one of three probably experiencing the greatest amount of conflict over the rights of its members who practice homosexuality. Not much is heard about the current debate in the other continents where the church operates, however, at present the UMC in Africa (generally) seems to have no problem with what the book of discipline states concerning homosexuality. Having dealt with a number of issues in the past, the UMC is now tackling its (homophobic?) beliefs on homosexuality. Consequently, division is seen between liberals and conservative members within the church. Nonetheless, the UMC, as set forth in its Book of Discipline - which is the official document governing the lives of United Methodists - holds that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching and, therefore, the church does not condone its practice.

² See Wikipedia [file:///E:/United Methodist Church.htm#Governance](file:///E:/United%20Methodist%20Church.htm#Governance) retrieved July 20th, 2010 (14h00)

1.2 Historical Context

Every four years, a General Conference is held in the USA by the UMC worldwide. It is in this conference where modifications of the Book of Discipline of the UMC are considered. Since 1972, efforts have been made by church officials and lay members of the church, to get the church to accept gays and lesbians into full fellowship but without any officially acknowledged success.

In the same year, a motion was added to the book of discipline in the section of social principles, stating:

*“Homosexuals no less than heterosexuals are persons of sacred worth, who need the ministry and guidance of the church in their struggles for human fulfilment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship which enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. Further we insist that all persons are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured, although we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.”*³

In 1976, the church adopted reports that stopped the funding of gay/lesbian support groups with church money. In 1984, the church passed a statement stressing “fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness”.⁴ It also stated that homosexuals are not to provide their services as officials in the ministry of the church. In 1988, the General Conference created a committee to study homosexuality. In 1992, the Committee made some recommendations to the General Conference in support of homosexuality but their recommendations were not approved. However, some modifications were made in the Book of Discipline emphasizing that Methodists are committed to support basic human and civil rights for homosexual people. In 1996, the General Conference added to the Book of Discipline (social principles) that United Methodist ministers shall not conduct any ceremonies celebrating homosexual unions and that United Methodist churches shall not be used for such purposes. In 2000, the fight for equal rights for gays and lesbians

³ http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_umc10.htm retrieved March 3rd, 2010 (15h00)

⁴ Ibid

continued and seemed to have hardened. Nonetheless, the UMC maintained the position taken in the previous conference that ministers shall not conduct any ceremonies celebrating homosexual unions and that United Methodist churches shall not be used for such purposes. In 2004, a new section 19 was added to the existing paragraph 611 of the 2000 Book of Discipline which states the following:

*“To ensure that no annual conference board, agency, committee, commission, or council shall give United Methodist funds to any gay caucus or group, or otherwise use such funds to promote the acceptance of homosexuality. The council shall have the right to stop such expenditures. This restriction shall not limit the Church's ministry in response to the HIV epidemic, nor shall it preclude funding for dialogs or educational events where the Church's official position is fairly and equally represented”.*⁵

In 2008, the motion to delete the denomination's policy that homosexual behaviour conflicts with Christian teaching was rejected. The 2012 General Conference retained the current stance and it seems the journey through these difficult waters will not end here. Advocates for change proclaimed they will not leave the church; they will live out their calling within the denomination (reported the UMNS on 5th May, 2012).

History has shown that when a group discriminated against organises and starts demanding for equal rights, eventually they get it. Will this be the case with the debate on Homosexuality in the United Methodist Church?

1.3 Literature Review

The practice of homosexuality has become one of the most divisive and painful issues in the church and society today. According to James B. Nelson (1978:188-197), there are four theological stances representing the range of current conviction towards those who practice homosexuality, such as rejecting-punitive, rejecting-non punitive, qualified acceptance, and full acceptance. These four positions fall under two: *rejecting and accepting* views. The UMC, as set forth in its Book of Discipline, seems to hold on to the rejecting non-punitive position. However, at present, the church is still struggling as it searches for God's true revelation on this complex matter.

⁵ Ibid.

The Book of Discipline of the UMC is defined as the instrument for setting forth the laws, plan, polity, and process by which United Methodists govern themselves (2004:v). Paragraph 161, appendix G, of the Social Principles of the book of discipline, reads:

Human Sexuality - We recognize that sexuality is God's good gift to all persons. We believe persons may be fully human only when that gift is acknowledged and affirmed by themselves, the church and society. We call all persons to the disciplined, responsible fulfilment of themselves, others, and society in the stewardship of this gift. We also recognize our limited understanding of this complex gift and encourage the medical, theological, and social science disciplines to combine in a determined effort to understand human sexuality more completely. We call the church to take the leadership role in bringing together these disciplines to address this most complex issue. Further, within the context of our understanding of this gift of God, we recognize that God challenges us to find responsible, committed, and loving forms of expression.

The last part of appendix G reads:

Homosexual persons no less than heterosexual persons are individuals of sacred worth. All persons need the ministry and guidance of the church in their struggles for human fulfilment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. We affirm that God's grace is available to all, and we will seek to live together in Christian community. We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.

The literature review deals with three main debates on homosexuality: the opposing debates within the church (in the UMC this debate is basically between Christians following the non-punitive rejecting approach and Christians arguing for full acceptance); debates based on scientific, medical and social science arguments about sexuality, and debates looking at issues from a human rights perspective.

1.3.1 Two opposing debates within the church

To be able to deal with all the arguments, put forward by the two main opposing groups in the UMC, the literature review will deal with them separately.

a) The Rejecting Non-punitive Position

This “majority position” in the UMC, asserts that though homosexuals are persons of sacred worth, like all human beings, the practice of homosexuality is not compatible with Christian teaching. The literature review on this section will look at Hays (1994), the Book of Discipline of the UMC (2004), Cahill (1994), Soards (1995), Coleman (1995), and Ratzinger (1986).

b) The Full Acceptance Position

This minority, but steadily growing, position asserts that homosexuality is a gift from God just like heterosexuality is, therefore, the church must accept homosexuality. Here I will look into the works of Germond (1997), Hays (1994), Nelson (1978), Jones and Workman (1994).

1.3.2 Arguments from other fields of study

Quite a good number of authors seem to agree that at present the scientific world presents a cloudy picture on the debate. Jones and Workman (1994: 94) assert that even the removal of homosexuality from the list of pathological psychiatric conditions in 1974 by the American psychiatric Association is cloudy. It “was an action taken with such unconventional speed that normal channels for considerations of the issues were circumvented”. Nelson (1978: 193) maintains that there is no general agreement about the causes of homosexuality. The psychogenic and the genetic approaches - which remain in dispute - are the two different approaches that major theories gather around. Jones and Workman conclude on the causes of homosexuality that there is a general consensus that no theory of homosexuality can explain such a diverse phenomenon. It seems that the genetic, hormonal, or psychological cause of homosexual orientation is not completely determinative. Rather, psychological, familial, and cultural explanations seem to be the most important here. Some researchers have admitted that when we know more about the causes of homosexuality then we shall know more about the causes of homosexuality. For Nelson, at least one thing is increasingly clear: sexual orientation is relatively fixed by

early childhood through processes about which the individual makes no conscious choice, and if that is so, then it is not easily reversed. Hays (1994:12-13) argues that even if same- sex preference was somehow proved to be genetically caused (inborn) or a disorder, as some argue, that would not necessarily make homosexual behaviour morally acceptable. “Surely Christian ethics does not want to hold that all inborn traits are good and desirable.”

1.3.3 Arguments based on human and civil rights

“Human Rights” is a relatively new expression that came into everyday usage since World War II and the founding of the UN in 1945. The Universal Declaration of Human rights was signed by the United nations General Assembly in 1948. The expression “human rights” has replaced the expression “natural rights” which fell into disfavour because of the great controversy it caused theologically (Steiner & Alston 2000:324). Human rights are “basic rights and freedoms to which all humans are entitled.” Proponents of the concept usually assert that all humans are endowed with certain entitlements merely by reason of being human. Human rights are thus conceived in a universalist and egalitarian fashion. Such entitlements can exist as shared norms of actual human moralities, as justified moral norms or natural rights supported by strong reasons, or as legal rights either at a national level or within international law. However, there is no consensus as to the precise nature of what in particular should or should not be regarded as a human right in any of the preceding senses, and the abstract concept of human rights has been a subject of intense philosophical debate and criticism.⁶ The complexity of this topic turns the homosexuality dilemma into an even more complex one.

We shall return to insights from natural and social sciences (3.2), as well as from human rights discourse (3.3), after dealing with the two major theological positions referred to in 3.1.

⁶ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_rights retrieved on October 1st, 2010 (18h00)

1.4 Demarcation of the study

It is the aim of this work to contribute to the wide and complex debate on homosexuality, particularly to the debate in the United Methodist Church. It is the task of this mini-thesis to focus on homosexuality from a theological, scientific, sociological and human rights perspective. Most importantly, this work will investigate and analyse the trend of the debate within the church; the church's struggle to conceptualize human and civil rights (freedom, marriage and ordination) in relation to homosexuality and the church's search for a Christian ethos. Human sexuality is an immense and complex field. It is the intention of this work to focus only on homosexuality as meaning the act of sexual involvement between people of the same sex. Furthermore, it is not the intention of this work to use any type of language that is derogatory and offensive towards those who practice homosexuality.

1.5 Statement of the Research Problem

What is the church's call in this controversial reality when, on the one side, the church believes that according to scripture, reason, experience and tradition, homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching and, on the other side, the church acknowledges that its understanding of human sexuality is limited and that only theology in a combined effort with other fields of study will help understand human sexuality more completely and therefore set the basis for a fair Christian ethical analysis? How can we know what God requires of us as "obedience"?

1.6 Research hypothesis

When appealing for tolerance in the face of diversity of theological opinion, John Wesley once said, "Though we may not think alike, may we not all love alike?" The phrase "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity" has become a maxim among Methodists, who have always maintained a great diversity of opinion on many matters within the Church.⁷

⁷ See http://en.allexperts.com/e/u/un/united_methodist_church.htm retrieved on October 12th, 2010 (13h00)

The question is whether this “formula” can be successfully applied to the dilemma of the UMC vis-à-vis homosexuality. What is essential? (The Bible? Whose interpretation of it? Jesus’ love command? Whose interpretation thereof?). What is non-essential? (Who will decide that? Can sexuality be non-essential?) How should charity be applied? (Through full acceptance or through non-punitive resistance? Through accepting the “person” but condemning the “sin”?)

A research hypothesis cutting to the heart of these questions would run as follows: With a majority conviction that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching; a steadily growing minority conviction that the responsible practice of homosexuality should be accepted and homosexuals should enter into full membership with the church; acceptance of non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation by progressive Constitutions and Bills of Rights globally, and the human rights culture in general, and the acknowledgement from the church that our human understanding of human sexuality is limited, a split in the UMC (as in other churches dealing with these same tensions), seems inevitable. In search of a Christian sexual ethic within a major church denomination, and with the available tools of “the tradition of Christian wisdom, the knowledge available in the natural and social sciences, the contemporary experience of the faithful, and the insight that comes only through prayer and the anguished searching of a restless heart” (Coleman 1995:72), it is difficult to foresee any form of consensus or charity that could bridge the big differences of opinion and conviction behind the two camps in the struggle: "rejection" of homosexuality (even when non-punitive) and "full acceptance", simply do not seem to be compatible, rationally and ethically. This mini-thesis will explore the United Methodist Church’s struggle in the search for ethical discernment on homosexuality from the hypothesis that “the centre cannot hold”, the church will eventually split on this issue, or it will have to find a miraculous new consensus on scriptural teaching on sexual issues.

1.7 Research Procedure/Methodology

The methodology used in this mini-thesis will be studying relevant literature and various debates and arguments (in the churches, in science, in human rights circles and in society at large). It shall involve a close reading of relevant literature that will allow me to identify, describe and explain the different aspects that contribute to the formation of a Christian ethos related to the debate on homosexuality. In line with the hypothesis the thesis will explore three major debates in detail and relate them to the UMC's struggle with homosexuality: the Biblical and theological differences within the church; the new insights on sexuality from the sciences, including social sciences; and the human rights arguments in favour of non-discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation.



CHAPTER 2

THE HISTORY OF THE DEBATE IN THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

2.1 Introduction

The General Conference is the only body that can speak officially for the United Methodist Church. Every four years, a General Conference is held in the USA by the UMC worldwide. It is in this conference where modifications of the Book of Discipline and the Book of Resolutions of the UMC are considered. Since 1972, efforts have been made by some church officials and lay members of the church, to get the church to accept gays and lesbians into full fellowship but there has not been any officially acknowledged success. The "Social Principles" are defined in the Book of Discipline as a "prayerful and thoughtful effort on the part of the General Conference to speak to the human issues in the contemporary world from a sound biblical and theological foundation as historically demonstrated in United Methodist traditions." (The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2004:95). The Book of Discipline is not legally binding but serves as a guide for the church for reference, encouragement, study and support.

When appealing for tolerance in the face of diversity of theological opinion, John Wesley once said, "Though we may not think alike, may we not all love alike?" The phrase "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity" has become a maxim among Methodists, who have always maintained a great diversity of opinion on many matters within the Church.⁸ This chapter will deal with the history of the church's struggle with the issue of homosexuality.

2.2 Decisions Taken by the General Conference from 1972 to 1996

The first public debate on homosexuality happened at the 1972 General Conference just four years after the formation of the UMC. At the conference, a four year committee that had studied the Social Principles recommended a new language, on

⁸ See http://en.allexperts.com/e/u/un/united_methodist_church.htm retrieved on October 12th, 2010 (13h00)

homosexuality, which reads as follows: “Homosexuals no less than heterosexuals are persons of sacred worth, who need the ministry and guidance of the church in their struggles for human fulfilment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship which enables reconciling relationships with God, with others and with self. Further, we insist that all persons are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured.” After some debate, the following was added to the paragraph: “...although we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.” This paragraph is believed to have set the stage for a long and painful struggle coming down to the present time.⁹

At the 1976 General Conference, efforts to revoke the church’s position were made but failed. Nonetheless, delegates adopted three reports focusing on church funding: no funds shall be given to any gay organization or used to promote the acceptance of homosexuality; resources and funds by boards and agencies shall be used only to support programs that are consistent with the church’s Social Principles; no funds shall be used for projects favouring homosexual practices. In the same conference, delegates revised the language in the Social Principles related to homosexual unions: “We do not recognize a relationship between two persons of the same sex as constituting marriage.”¹⁰

At the 1980 General Conference the positions taken in 1976 were left intact. But a statement was included in the Social Principles, stating: “We affirm the sanctity of the marriage covenant, which is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity between a man and a woman.”¹¹

The 1984 General Conference made no changes in the Social Principles. It dealt mostly with issues surrounding requirements for ordination. After a long debate, the Conference adopted “fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness” as a standard for ordained clergy. And the following language on homosexuality: “Since the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, self-avowed practicing

⁹ <http://archives.umc.org/umns/backgrounders.asp?ptid=2&story={FA58780B-1C10-491A-938E-E242A5D47186}&mid=905> last updated January 6, 2001/ retrieved on April 13, 2011, 13h00.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

homosexuals are not to be accepted as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in the United Methodist Church.”¹²

In 1988 a change was made in the Social Principles’ statement: “...Although we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching, we affirm that God's grace is available to all. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.” The conference recognized that this debate has proved to be particularly troubling to conscientious Christians with different opinions and that biblical, theological, and scientific questions related to the debate remain in dispute. Therefore, the General Council on Ministries was instructed to conduct a study on homosexuality and report to the 1992 General Conference. A 27-member committee was created and instructed the following: to conduct a study of homosexuality as a subject for theological and ethical analysis and to note where there is consensus among biblical scholars, theologians and ethicists, and where there is not; seek the best biological, psychological, and sociological information and opinion on the nature of homosexuality noting where there is a consensus among informed scientists and where there is not; and explore the implications of the study for the Social Principles. A 33 page report on the study was forwarded to the 1992 General Conference. Seventeen members of the committee voted to ask the General Conference to remove from the Social Principles the language condemning homosexual practice and replace it with an acknowledgment that the church “has been unable to arrive at a common mind” on the issue. Four members agreed that the committee found no common mind on the issue but recommended that the language in the Social Principles be retained. A vote of 710-238 ruled to retain the church’s stand that homosexual practice is “incompatible with Christian teaching”¹³.

The 1996 General Conference added three significant points to the church’s position on homosexuality: it created a footnote defining “self-avowed practicing homosexual”; it declared that ceremonies celebrating homosexual unions are not to be conducted by United Methodist clergy or in the UMCs; and it called for the US military not to exclude persons from service “solely on the basis of sexual orientation”. An effort

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

to have “clear and convincing evidence” of the practice of homosexuality used as the basis for prohibiting ordination or appointment was rejected. Another attempt to replace the “incompatibility” clause with the acknowledgement that United Methodists are unable to find a common mind failed to pass by a 577-378 vote. The majority opposing the deletion of the “incompatibility” clause was lower in number compared to a similar vote in 1988 and 1992. The three next General Conferences will be highlighted with more details in to show just how much hurt and despair the debate is causing as time goes by.

2.3 The 2000 General Conference

The 2000 General Conference added a new statement to the Social Principles: "We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn their lesbian and gay members and friends." In a resolution passed by the delegates the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns was instructed to engage the church in a continued dialogue about homosexuality. By a vote of 705-210, delegates declined to add to the church's law book a stipulation that before pastors could be assigned to any church they had to sign a statement: "I do not believe that homosexuality is God's perfect will for any person. I will not practice it. I will not promote it. I will not allow its promotion to be encouraged under my authority."¹⁴ They also declined to add language to the Book of Discipline that would have made the performance of a same-sex union a chargeable offence even in states where such a ceremony is legal. Such extreme measures may not seem necessary since the denomination already upholds the official position that same-sex unions shall not be conducted by United Methodist ministers and shall not be held in United Methodist churches. Violating that rule could lead to charges against a minister, according to the denomination's Judicial Council.

Since the 2000 General Conference, the UMC has been registering serious protests against church policies on homosexuality. On May 10, 2000, Tim Tanton reported on the United Methodist News Services that more than 180 people, including a United Methodist bishop, were arrested for participating in a protest against United Methodist policies regarding homosexuality. About 300 protesters rallied and marched around the Cleveland Convention Center, where the GC was taking place, singing “We

¹⁴ Ibid.

are Marching in the Light of God”. Protesters started gathering before 7 a.m. and many of them wore shirts with sayings, “Stop the spiritual violence. The debate must end. We are God’s children too.” The rally was organized by Soulfource (a coalition of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people and heterosexuals from a variety of faith backgrounds). Soulfource is pressurising the United Methodist church and other mainline denominations to fully accept sexual minorities in the life of the church. Groups of 13 to 25 took turns blocking the convention centre driveway (a symbolic way of saying, “Stay in there, until you get it right”) and were led away by the police and charged with aggravated disorderly conduct. Bishop C. Joseph Sprague (head of the denomination's Northern Illinois Annual ‘regional’ Conference) was one of the first arrested. Nine other retired or active bishops were part of the rally. When interviewed, Rev. Mel White (co-founder of Soulfource and member of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches) said that he planned to have 1000 people arrested at the 2004 General Conference.

Among the arrested there were three other United Methodist men namely Rev. James Lawson, co-worker of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.; the Rev. Greg Dell of Chicago, who was convicted in a March 1999 church trial for performing a same-sex ceremony and suspended; and Jimmy Creech, a former clergyman who lost his orders after being convicted in a November church trial on a similar charge. Others participating in the rally and march included Arun Gandhi, grandson of Mohandas Gandhi; Yolanda King, the eldest daughter of the late civil rights leader; and Rodney Powell, another co-worker of Martin Luther King in the 1950s and 1960s. Bishop Susan Morrison (from the New York area) described her participation in the demonstration a “sign act of gracious hospitality”. She believes that change is inevitable, it is coming, though it may take a new generation for things to change. Rev. James Lawson described the movement for inclusion of gays and lesbians as a continuation of the civil rights struggles of other groups in the United States - African Americans, women, the elderly, Latinos, the disabled. Like the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, this effort is nonviolent and rooted in faith. “These are all baptized people”, he said (UMNS May 10, 2000, report by Tim Tanton). Marilyn Alexander, executive director of the Reconciling Congregations Program, an unofficial United Methodist group that supports full inclusion of homosexuals in the life of the church said that they have done a lot of work within the

system, now comes the time when it will take something extraordinary to push people to see just how important this is. At every General Conference, whenever the church maintains its stance on homosexuality, it means for the gay and lesbian community another horrible four years of pain and suffering, she said.

2.4 The 2004 General Conference

At the 2004 General Conference which happened from the 27th April to the 7th May, the church upheld its stance on homosexuality and tensions rose again but this time in a much more peaceful way. In the words of Jim Perry - then chairperson of the Committee on General Conference - the demonstration was “a peaceful, worshipful moment.” The UMNS dated May 6, 2004, reported that at 11h10 a.m., a day before the closing of the conference, a slow rhythm beaten by a drummer signalled the beginning of a peaceful interruption. More than 500 supporters of full rights for gay men and lesbians in the United Methodist Church circled the floor of the conference for 35 minutes carrying banners and singing hymns of reconciliation protesting church policies. “As the demonstration went on, many delegates and bishops on the podium stood, sang and clapped in unison with the demonstrators.”

2.4.1 Separation within the Church?

On the same day, a document was circulating, proposing an amicable divorce over “irreconcilable differences”. Such a proposal was an unofficial document and was supposedly circulated by the conservatives. Rev. Bill Hinson and Rev. James V. Heidinger II, two key conservative church leaders, spoke openly on that day. Their comments stated that the church is in “a deep theological divide”. The debate has gone on for more than 30 years and there is no expectation that an agreement will ever be reached. The gulf is too deep and there is no middle ground for continuing a relationship. Those within the church supporting inclusivity of homosexuals feel disenfranchised; they want freedom, space and autonomy to pursue their own glorious vision, while we pursue ours. Therefore the question must not be whether to do it or not, but how. Rev. Hinson described the dilemma as an 800-pound gorilla hanging around General Conference. “We are dealing with people who feel we need to bring our church into our (secular) culture and that is for me the worst thing the church can do. As the debate goes on both sides get

hurt and we wouldn't want that to continue. A separation, not a split, would symbolize love", said Rev. Hinson. Rev. Heidinger pointed out that the fact that the Western Jurisdiction continues to say they will not be silent in their advocacy of full inclusion for gays and lesbians at every level of the church, including ordination, shows that they are already operating as a church within the church which means that they are not abiding by the Discipline of the church. So, according to him the real question that had to be faced was: "Do we even have a covenant?"

The idea was quickly condemned by most church leaders who reminded that the United Methodist Church is committed to live in Christian community together. Liberal groups also rejected any split and affirmed that they will remain in the UMC no matter how long it takes to have a fully inclusive church. Retired Bishop C. Dale White described the idea as "foolish, hurtful and destructive". There is no reason to destroy a great church on the basis of peripheral issues. He argued that Methodists do agree on the core issues of ministry and theology though they may articulate them differently. He reminded delegates of the fact that the UMC has affected incredible growth in Africa. Bishop William Oden of the Dallas area said: "I see us as a church moving toward listening to one another rather than towards separation or divorce." Other people expressed their sadness on the fact that the church has focused too much energy and money on the issue and is being distracted from its mission and ministry, which is to spread the gospel.

As seen above, the "full acceptance" group would rather fight their battle within the church than switch to another church and that is what is still holding the UMC together. Ideas diverge whether this strategy means something good or bad for the church.

2.4.2. Unity Resolution

The next day, May 7, the last day of the General Conference, the delegates stood, joined hands and sang "Blest Be The Tie That Binds" before approving a resolution affirming the unity of the church. This action was in response to the circulation of the document that suggested the separation of the church the day before. The resolution which was approved by a vote of 869-41, with 8 abstentions, reads as follows:

“As United Methodists we remain in covenant with one another, even in the midst of disagreement, and affirm our commitment to work together for our common mission of making disciples throughout the world.”

Rev. Bruce Robbins (former top staff executive for the United Methodist Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns) said that the result of the vote shows that the UMC strives towards and is determined to seek unity and that that is the goal. The question is how to discern ways to build bridges over the differences. Rev. Bill Mcalilli of Mississippi asked that the moderate voices of the church (a group he called ‘Methodist Middle’) be represented in future discussions about unity. His comments were that those who are neither on the left or right are often silent, and perhaps that is their sin. If those in the middle can contain those on either side, then maybe the church can find the unity it seeks.

2.5 The 2008 General Conference

At the 2008 General Conference, April 30, in Texas, delegates rejected changes to the UM Social Principles that would have acknowledged that church members disagree on homosexuality. Instead, delegates retained the language in the Book of Discipline describing homosexual practice as “incompatible with Christian teaching”. Again this action caused a heated debate for some argued that the acknowledgement that church members disagree on the issue would reflect the current reality in the church: we are divided. A new resolution was also approved opposing homophobia and heterosexism. Other actions were taken on sexuality issues, such as:

- Add the words ‘sexual orientation’ to an existing resolution regarding a commitment to educational opportunity regardless of gender, sexual orientation, ethnic origin or economic or social background;
- Retain language of Paragraph 341.6 in the Discipline that prohibits United Methodist ministers from conducting ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions;
- Reject a proposal to add ‘civil unions’ to a list of basic civil liberties in Paragraph 162.H because delegates felt the language was already inclusive;

- Reject amending Paragraph 161.C to include ‘committed unions’ in a section describing the sanctity of the marriage covenant.”(UMNS April 30, 2008 by Robin Russel)

In a reaction to the 30th April decisions more than 200 demonstrators declared the church policies and practices against homosexuality as sinful. The demonstrators wore black, symbolizing “brokenness in the body of Christ”. A witness, speaking on behalf of the protesters, told the GC that by refusing to accept and honour everyone’s call to professional ministry, the church denies the rules of John Wesley (Methodism’s founder) which are: do not harm, do good and stay in love with God. Some other witnesses affirmed that homosexuality is a gift of God and that the church is living with a lie by considering homosexuality incompatible with Christian teaching.

2.6 The current situation

At 7:00 a.m., February 2, 2011, the UMNS reported that 33 retired bishops (40% of the denomination’s 85 retired bishops) released a “Statement of Counsel to the Church” calling on the UMC to remove its ban on homosexual clergy. Thirty one of those who signed live and serve in the USA, the other two are from Sierra Leone and Switzerland. The bishops claim that the statement is the result of a thoughtful and prayerful consideration of the bible, Wesleyan heritage and their experience of the church and the world and their “conviction of God’s intention for a world transformed.”¹⁵ The bishops seek:

“To affirm that the historic tests of “gifts and evidence of God’s grace” for ordained ministry override any past or present temporal restrictions such as race, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

To urge the Church, ecumenical and denominational, to change the manner in which it relates to gay, lesbian and transgendered persons in official statements, judicial proceedings, and in congregational life.

¹⁵ A Statement of Counsel to the Church/ www.umc.org retrieved on May 5, 2011, 15h00.

To declare our conviction that the current disciplinary position of The United Methodist Church, a part of our historical development, need not, and should not, be embraced as the faithful position for the future.

To make known our names and shared personal conviction on this matter and to encourage other church and Episcopal leaders to do the same.”¹⁶

Since then, 3 more bishops signed the statement bringing the number to a total of 36. There has been mixed responses to the statement released. Retired Bishop Neil L. Irons (the Executive Secretary of the Council of Bishops) said that it is the first time in his memory that so many bishops release a public statement such as this. There was a statement signed by 15 bishops in the 1996 GC advocating that gays and lesbians be welcome into ordained ministry but not every bishop who signed was aware the statement would be made public.

As response, a statement was released on February 3, on behalf of the Council of Bishops by its president Larry Goopaster. It reads as follows:

“The Council of Bishops remains committed to leading the church in our mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Such transformation includes increasing the capacity of church and culture to engage in thoughtful, prayerful dialogue about sensitive and challenging issues, and to make decisions that grow out of that thought, prayer and reflection. We call this Holy Conferencing.

We are committed to embody this in our own life as a council and lead the church in doing the same. We are further committed to living within the covenant defined by our Book of Discipline and fully understand that it is the General Conference that re-examines that covenant every four years and has the responsibility to define our covenant for the next four years.

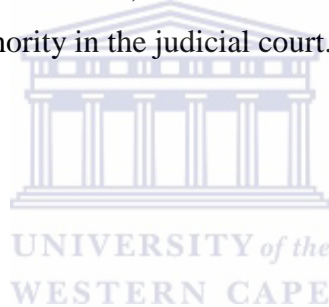
We ask everyone to join us in prayer and fasting on behalf of the whole church and as we move toward our General Conference in Tampa in 2012.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ <http://www.umc-gbcs.org> retrieved on May 10, 2011, 13h00

The 2012 General Conference endured the same pain and hurt on the part of pro-homosexuals but it is said that it has been less dramatic and it seems the church spent less time discussing about human sexuality.

It is noted that no General Conference has ever pronounced a ban on homosexuals from becoming members of the church. However, as stated above, a United Methodist Pastor who is a self-avowed homosexual conducts a same-sex union, and uses United Methodist Churches for the same purpose shall face charges of violation of the church's discipline and be prosecuted by the Judicial Council which can result in the stripping of the pastor's credentials as an ordained United Methodist minister. In the next chapter I will share stories of pastors who were on trial over the homosexuality dilemma. We will look at the church's response to those who according to the Book of Discipline violate the discipline of the church on homosexuality. We shall also notice, through the stories, a certain uncertainty on the part of the church when making use of its authority in the judicial court.



CHAPTER 3

THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH AND HOMOSEXUALITY TRIALS

3.1 A Pastor Denies a Gay Membership

Though the General Conference has never pronounced a ban on homosexuals, there has been one official case where a United Methodist pastor denied membership to a homosexual. Rev. Ed Johnson, a senior pastor of the South Hill Virginia United Methodist Church, was placed on an involuntary leave by his bishop for not allowing a gay man to join his congregation. The Virginia conference tried to bar Rev. Johnson from the ministry for a year as consequence of his decision. Rev. Johnson appealed his punishment to the highest court of the UMC, the Judicial Council, who concluded that pastors have the authority to decide who becomes a member of a local church and ordered Johnson be reinstated to ministry. The controversial ruling caused heightened tensions and consequently a response from the Council of Bishops: A Pastoral Letter to the People of the United Methodist Church. The letter aimed at clarifying on just how much authority pastors have on membership in the UMC. In the letter, the bishops affirm both a pastor's right to determine membership and a homosexual person's right to become a member of the church. Bishop Peter Weaver, then president of the Council of Bishops and leader of the church's New England Conference, said that the local pastor has authority over the membership of the church, but it is exercised in the context of the theology and values of the United Methodist Church that includes the clause rejecting the practice of homosexuality as well as the clause affirming homosexual persons as people "of sacred worth".¹⁸

3.2 A Pastor has his Credentials removed

Jimmy Creech, a pastor from Nebraska, performed a same-sex ceremony in September 1997 and was charged with disobedience to the discipline of the UMC. After a hearing in January 23rd, 1998, the committee in charge of the investigation in the Nebraska Annual Conference determined that the case goes to a church trial where

¹⁸ http://kwing.christiansonnet.org/church-news/church_Methodist.htm#_Toc192428304 retrieved on May 20, 2011, 14h30

the pastor was acquitted of the charges on March 13th as result of an 8-5 ruling. Nine votes out of the thirteen are needed for a conviction. Creech was reinstated and preached the next Sunday. Nonetheless, while on leave of absence in April 1999, Creech performed a same-sex ceremony in Chapel Hill. Once again the Nebraska Conference determined that Creech should face trial. Creech had a unanimous conviction for blatantly disobeying the discipline of the church and was stripped of his credentials as an ordained minister in the UMC on November 17th, 1999 (As reported by the UMNS).

3.3 A Pastor is suspended

Rev. Greg Dell, a clergyman from Illinois, was charged in September 1998 with disobedience to the order and discipline of the denomination for performing a same-sex ceremony. After a church trial Rev. Dell was found guilty and suspended indefinitely after he denied signing a pledge agreeing not to perform same-sex ceremonies or until the church prohibited the action no longer. The suspension was later amended to a year only, consequently he returned to a local church pastorate a year after his suspension. He is now retired.

3.4 A Self-Avowed Lesbian Pastor Acquitted

On Valentine's Day 2001, Rev. Karen Dammann, a United Methodist Church minister, sent a letter to her bishop, informing him that she was "living in a partnered, covenanted, homosexual relationship," raising a young son together with her partner. Rev. Dammann was acquitted of the charges in March despite her openness in flouting the church's policies. The decision came after a three day trial, with eleven jurors voting "not guilty" and two undecided, because it lacked "clear and convincing evidence" that she had been engaged in "practices declared by the United Methodist Church to be incompatible with Christian teachings." Conviction, which would have required nine "guilty" votes, could have meant permanent removal from her ministerial position with the United Methodist Church or a lesser penalty. Rev. Karen Dammann's acquittal sparked a firestorm of controversy within the denomination.

James D. Berkley, Issues Ministry Director for Presbyterians for Renewal in Bellvue- Washington, had a commentary posted by *Christianity Today* claiming the United Methodist Church's law was "mugged" by the jury and warning that members of other denominations should not get too smug because "[t]his kind of mob justice may be coming soon to a church near you." The Confessing Movement, a renewal organization in the UMC that advocates traditional interpretations of Scripture, went so far as to call the decision an "indefensible and schismatic action."¹⁹ (As reported in the UMNS).

3.5 Complaints Dismissed against a Minister

Mark Williams, then pastor of Woodland Park UMC in Seattle, announced that he was gay at the Pacific Northwest Annual Conference session in June 2001. The case was dismissed after a 30th May, 2002, hearing claiming there was no reasonable cause to forward the matter to a church trial. After the dismissal, the minister told UMNS that the statement he made to the conference referred only to his sexual orientation and not to his sexual behaviour.

3.6 A United Methodist Lesbian Minister Defrocked

The United Methodist Church's highest court defrocked a lesbian minister, overturning a lower panel's ruling that had reversed the penalty earlier. Elizabeth Stroud's case began in early 2004 when she revealed during a sermon at the First United Methodist Church in Germantown, that she is living in a sexually active relationship with a female partner. She was stripped of her ministerial credentials in December 2004 by a lower court that found her guilty of violating the church's Book of Discipline, which forbids the ordination and appointment of "self-avowed practicing homosexuals." Stroud appealed the ruling, and in April the Northeastern Jurisdiction Committee on Appeals reversed and set aside the verdict, nullifying the penalty on "technical" matters. The Judicial Council, making the final judgement, upheld the initial lower court ruling and defrocked Stroud. Elizabeth Stroud "was accorded all fair and due process rights" and the "regulation of the practice of homosexuality" does not

¹⁹ Ibid.

violate the provisions of the denomination's constitution, the ruling read. However, the church did not rule for expulsion or suspension. Stroud can still serve as a lay person in the church.

Conservatives within the Methodist Church applauded the ruling and said it is proof that the denomination's systems and processes are working correctly. "We were pleased to see the Judicial Council action though we were not surprised," said James V. Heidinger II, then President of the conservative Good News United Methodist magazine and group. "I think the church's processes have worked as they should have and so we are grateful." The decision by the nine-member Judicial Council finalized Stroud's case and marks the latest development over an issue that has divided some of the largest Christian denominations. According to Heidinger, the entire process was handled in a "compassionate and caring" manner. "The church's standards have been worked out with an effort to be compassionate with persons that were dealing with the issue of homosexuality," said Heidinger. "We acknowledged that they are persons of sacred worth, but the focus is on the practice, and the church has said for two thousand years that the practice is incompatible with Christian teachings." Accordingly, in its decision, the Judicial Council included a paragraph acknowledging the sensitivities involved in the case. "The Church continues to struggle with the issue of homosexuality," the ruling stated. "While the Judicial Council must be faithful to its charge from the Church we are also sensitive to the hurt, pain and brokenness of the family of God."²⁰

3.7 A United Methodist Pastor given a 20 day Suspension

Rev. Amy DeLong, 44, was unanimously found guilty by a Jury of 13 Wisconsin United Methodist clergy on June 22, 2011, of violating the United Methodist Book of Discipline by performing a same-sex union on September 19, 2009. The UMNS comments that for "the first time in 20 years, a conviction for performing a same-sex union has not resulted in a United Methodist elder's defrocking or indefinite suspension."²¹ Instead, Rev. Amy DeLong was suspended from her ministerial functions

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ www.umc.org retrieved on July 11, 2011, 13h50.

for a period of 20 days starting 1st July. Furthermore, she was also sentenced “to a more detailed process for a year after her suspension to ‘restore the broken clergy covenant relationship’”.²² This decision is believed to be sending signals to the church as a whole. DeLong admitted to be a lesbian and refused to pledge not to perform same-sex unions in the future. Mr. Campbell, one of the elders at the trial warned the church of the possible consequences if Rev. DeLong is not penalized adequately. He called for the church to remember the brothers and sisters in other parts of the world. “There is no disputing that becoming a more gay-affirming church would severely harm our church’s witness in other countries where our brothers and sisters are confronted with life-and-death circumstances in their conflict with radical Islam,” he said.

3.8 Legal Battles do not lead to a Solution

Taking a close look at the cases mentioned above, one would question the judgements given to different cases. It is true that the UMC, particularly in America, is in a deep theological divide when it comes to the issue of homosexuality. And because this debate seems to be taking a lifetime, Methodists worldwide are being involved in the unsolved dilemma. I was told by one of the 2008 and 2012 delegates of the West Angolan Annual Conference to the General Conference about what she described as “disgusting” practises employed at the General Conference, such as what she called “pro-homosexuals” trying to buy votes from some delegates in order to vote for their cause. Such attempts have been seen by especially African delegates as a sign of a group of people fighting for “the acceptance of their own carnal wishes”.

The legal battles within the UMC do not seem to facilitate a solution; rather, they simply underline the hardening frontiers of a spiritual battle within the membership of this worldwide denomination.

²² Ibid.

CHAPTER 4

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL DEBATES ON HOMOSEXUALITY

Different Christian denominations differ in their opinions for or against homosexuality. The United Methodist Church, like most mainline churches, is against the practice of homosexuality. The practice of homosexuality has become one of the most divisive and painful issues in the church and society today. According to James B. Nelson (1978:188-197), there are four theological stances representing the range of current conviction towards those who practice homosexuality, such as rejecting-punitive, rejecting-non punitive, qualified acceptance, and full acceptance. These four positions fall under two main views: the *rejecting and accepting* views. This chapter will look at the two opposing debates within the church from the biblical and theological perspectives.

The UMC, as set forth in its Book of Discipline, seems to hold on to the rejecting non-punitive position. However, there is a growing minority that champions and promotes the full acceptance view. And so, the church struggles as it searches for God's true revelation on this complex matter. To be able to deal with all the arguments, put forward by the two main opposing groups in the UMC, I will look at them separately.

4.1 The Rejecting Non-punitive Position

This “majority position” in the UMC, was summarized in a Minority Report of the Committee created to study homosexuality by the general Conference in 1988:

*The biblical, theological, ethical, biological, psychological, and sociological insights at present do not provide satisfactory reasons upon which homosexual practice shall be condoned or considered an act compatible with the Christian teaching.*²³

Hays (1994:5) asserts that, when looking at the issue of homosexuality in the light of the Bible, one must consider the biblical texts that explicitly say something about homosexuality, how these texts should be assessed in the wider biblical framework and in

²³ See [www.religioustolerance.org/UMC and Homosexuality](http://www.religioustolerance.org/UMC_and_Homosexuality) retrieved in June 15th, 2010 (13h30min)

relation to other fields and finally ask what must the church do. Cahill points that in using scripture as a resource for Christian ethics one engages in at least three dimensions: “specific texts on the issue at hand, specific texts on related issues, and general biblical themes or patterns” (Cahill 1994:64). A way to discern the truth of God in this matter would be the use of John Wesley’s famous ‘quadrilateral’ of scripture, reason, tradition and experience (A Discussion Guide for the Methodist people of Southern Africa 2003: 2).

A cursory survey of theological literature on homosexuality from the non-punitive but rejecting approach, delivers the following picture:

4.1.1 What does the Bible say?

Genesis 19:1-29. The Bible hardly ever discusses homosexual behaviour or says little about it. Gen.19:1-29 is a good example of a passage often used in the debate of homosexuality which is irrelevant to the topic. This passage is about Sodom’s and Gomorrah’s inhospitality and lack of attention to the poor (Hays 1994:5-6) and (Soards 1995:15-16). Coleman (1995:59), however, argues that homosexuality is one among the many sins for which God condemned Sodom and to argue that there is no sexual interest of any kind in it would be an erroneous interpretation of the Bible. The scriptural passages in 2 Peter 2:7 and Jude 7 account for that. Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, seems to agree that a moral judgment is surely made against homosexual relations, in the passage cited above (1986:41).

Leviticus 18: 22; 20:13. In the light of the Old Testament, homosexual behaviour is listed along with a series of other sexual offences that are punishable by death. Hays (1994:6) asserts that Leviticus makes no distinction between ritual law and moral law. In each case, the church faces the task of discerning whether Israel’s traditional norms can be applicable to the new community of Jesus’ followers in today’s world. In the words of Soards (1995: 25):

Scripture is a vital witness that speaks through the work of the Holy Spirit in relation to the specific dynamics of concrete historical circumstances. Thus we labour to comprehend the meaning of the Bible for our lives today. We listen to the voice of the Bible, and then under the guidance of the Spirit we ask what God requires of us as obedience.

Coleman (1995:62) suggests that while it is important to bear in mind some of the interpretations given to these passages for the sake of “understanding the general context of the time, it is wrong to conclude that *at the same time* the texts do not condemn homosexual activity”. The words in the biblical passage suggest that what is allowed for a man to do with a woman is not allowed for a man to do with another man.

The New Testament, like the Old Testament, seems to condemn the behaviour. Here Paul is the main character. The biblical texts commonly used in the debate are: I Cor. 6:9; I Tim.1:10; Rom. 1:18-32. In the first and second passages, Hays (1994:6-7) argues that Paul discusses a number of practices that are committed by the ‘lawless and disobedient’ and homosexual behaviour is one of them with no special attention shown towards the debate. However, the third biblical passage (Rom. 1:18-32) explicitly condemns homosexuality. Hays (1994: 7-9) interprets this passage in the following way: First, Paul gives an account of the universal fall of humanity which is manifested in various ungodly behaviours listed in verses 24-31. Second, Paul pays special attention to homosexual intercourse and explains the way in which human fallenness distorts God’s created order. In its fallenness humans reject the creator’s design. “They *embody* the spiritual condition of those who have ‘exchanged the truth about God for a lie’”. Third, homosexual acts are not worse than any other manifestations of human unrighteousness named in the passage (vv. 29-31). Lastly, Paul echoes a traditional Jewish idea: a homosexual act will not cause God to punish homosexuals; it is a punishment in its own.

In the same line of thinking, Soards (1995:23-24) states that the origins, motivations or gratifications of homosexual activity were not Paul’s or other ancient thinkers’ concerns. Paul’s discernments and declarations of God’s relationship to humans places homosexual acts outside the boundaries of God’s intention for humanity.

Coleman (1995:66-67) goes further in an attempt to answer comments some writers make on what exactly the New Testament (especially Paul) is reacting to when speaking of what is termed today as homosexuality. According to some writers the NT is referring to pederasty only (which was a particular form of homosexuality) and not homosexuality as a mutual consent relationship. Coleman suggests that even if pederasty is the theme in question, it does not mean that Paul would see homosexual relationship by mutual consent as God’s will. The language Paul uses particularly in Romans 1: 26-27

makes it difficult to conclude that Paul is not referring to something more than just pederasty.

4.1.2 The wider biblical framework

Hays (1994:10-11) asserts that one has to consider how scripture frames the discussion in a broad way. First, texts such as Gen. 1-3, Mark 10:2-9, I Thess. 4:3-8, I Cor. 7:1-9, Eph. 5:21-33, and Heb. 13:4, provide the picture of marriage against which the bible few categorical negations of homosexuality must be read. Second, the bible provides us with accounts of the human bondage to sin (Rom.1: 21-22, 32). Once in the fallen state we are 'slaves of sin' (Rom. 6:17; 7), and God's act of liberation transforms and sets us free from the power of sin (Rom. 6:20-22, 8:1-11, cf.12:1-2). Third, Christian experience has intrinsically included in it an eschatological character. Hays states in this regard (1994:11): "The 'redemption of our bodies' remains a future hope; final transformation of our fallen physical state awaits the resurrection. Consequently, in the interim some may find disciplined abstinence the only viable alternative to disordered sexuality". Fourth, scripture along with many subsequent generations of faithful Christians bear witness of the possibility of living with freedom, joy, and service without sexual relations. Some passages even commend celibate life as a way of faithfulness (Mat.19:10-11; I Cor. 7).

Most authors seem to agree that the bible does not contain Jesus' teaching on homosexuality. Nonetheless, Soards (1995:28) mentions that Jesus discussed human sexuality when asked about his position on 'divorce' (Mark 10:3-4). And His "teaching shows that he understood heterosexual union in the context of marriage to be the norm of divinely intended human sexual behaviour". Still, from Jesus' lifestyle (celibacy), it seems that male and female sexual union is not a necessary condition for human fulfilment.

4.2 The Full Acceptance Position

Germond (1997: 188-197) uses a different approach when using the bible to assert the homosexuality debate. He suggests that there are two ways of reading and using

biblical evidence about homosexuality. One is within the framework of inclusion, and the other within the framework of exclusion. Each and every one of us reads and interprets the bible in the light of our life experience and the writers of the bible were people just like us who wrote the bible in the light of their cultural perspectives and assumptions. Traditional theology claims to be absolute, essential and universal. It believes that it speaks on behalf of God. Feminist and liberation theologians have challenged such a theology and demonstrated that it is in fact a particularistic, partisan, and contextually specific theology. It is anything but universal. Traditional “theology is culturally specific (generally Western), gender specific (generally male), racially specific (generally white) and class specific (generally the privileged class), and, as I wish to argue, specific in its assumptions about sexual orientation (overwhelmingly heterosexual)”. For Germond, it is not the origin of being heterosexual or homosexual that is important, but our experience of sexuality and the way this is mediated by our religious life, whether religious mediation leads to alienation or inclusion in the household of God. The theology of inclusion is central to the Christian message and it challenges every attempt of the church to create categories of exclusion.

4.2.1 What does the Bible say?

Furnish (1994:18) presents four reasons why the question, “What does the bible say about homosexuality?” is misleading: First, such a question does not take into account the fact that the ancient world had no word for or concept of “homosexuality”. Second, it is simply wrong to assume that the bible says *just one* thing about any given subject when the bible is a collection of writings of different authors, times, and places. Third, those who ask such question fail to realize that it is part of their duty to determine what the biblical writings say as well as why these writings say what they do. And there is a fourth critical question for those who regard the biblical writings as authoritative: “How, if at all, may these ancient texts inform our understanding and give us moral guidance in today’s world?” Furthermore, two points need to be noted about terminology. First, there were no terms such as “sexuality”, “heterosexuality”, “homosexuality”, or “bisexuality” in the ancient world. These happen to be abstract concepts for which we are indebted to modern psychology. “It was universally presupposed that everyone was ‘heterosexual’ in the sense of being inherently (‘naturally’) constituted for physical union

with the opposite sex. Thus, there is no biblical passage about 'homosexuality' understood as a 'condition' or 'orientation.'" Second, neither the word "sodomite" appears in the Hebrew text of the O.T nor does it ever appear in the Greek text of the N.T. "These observations should remind us that translations can sometimes be misleading and that the exact meaning of a word always depends in part on the context in which it appears."

Nissinen (1998:123) states that the biblical material related to same-sex eroticism (called "homosexuality" today) is sparse, scattered and ambiguous. One thing they have in common, though, is their negativity towards sexual contact between people of the same sex. But it is also true that it is the modern community that unites the texts as a group of biblical references against what is called today "homosexuality" rather than the biblical material in its own right. If we want the bible and other ancient sources to contribute to today's discussion, the sensible hermeneutical principle has to be applied, which is, there must be a sufficient correlation between the topics discussed today and the ancient sources. The fact that biblical arguments are held normative in today's decisions should remind us that the arguments of the bible and other ancient sources focus on issues and phenomena of their time and space. Today's questions reflect the world we live in and the motivations for biblical interpretation and argumentation vary.

He goes further saying that it is quite possible that no biblical author approved of homoeroticism in any form they knew. What did they know about homosexuality in those times? "The perspective of biblical texts is clearly centred around physical sexual contacts, the background of which is seen in idolatry or moral corruption and the motivation for which is attributed to excessive lust (Romans 1) or xenophobia (Genesis 19; Judges 19). Love and positive feelings are not mentioned; responsible relationships based in love seem to be completely inconceivable." In this sequence, it would be unfair to claim that Paul would condemn all homosexuality everywhere, always, and in every form, since there is no such thing as "homosexuality in general, what exists instead is different kinds of same-sex activities and relationships that appear in specific cultural conditions - not in timeless spaces" (Nissinen 1998; 124).

Against these general hermeneutical observations key biblical texts in the current debate on homosexuality will briefly be discussed:

Germond (1997: 197- 199) looks at Genesis 1:27-8 and Genesis 2:18-25 as the two creation myths of the bible that have long been used as the basis for Christian ethics. The first text identifies human procreation as a blessing and links it to sexual differentiation but it does not identify procreation as essential to or primary for morally normative expressions of human sexuality. The second text is concerned not with the differences of the human partners, but their similarities. Here, human sexuality is understood as the expression and enrichment of human relationship. Furnish (1994:23) claims that although “the creation accounts presume and explain heterosexual behaviour, they do not command it. They are not about God’s will for individual members of the species but only about what is typical of the species as a whole. For this reason, they take no account whatever of the physically or mentally impaired, the celibate, the impotent - or of those who in modern times have come to be described as ‘homosexual’”.

Genesis 19: 1-29. Germond (1997: 197-199) argues that this biblical account and the obvious parallels in Judges 19:16-29, make it clear that what the men of Sodom intended was rape. The homosexual assault is one among Sodom’s transgressions and it can be understood as the concrete expression of the Sodomites’ lack of hospitality and general decadence. Furnish (1994: 19) argues that this is neither a story about homosexuality in general nor about homosexual acts performed by consenting adults but about the intent to do violence to strangers. Furthermore, one should note that all the biblical accounts paralleled to this account make the point of greed and indifference to those in need (Ezekiel 16), inhospitality in general (Mat. 10:12-15 and Lk.10:10-12), and a reminder of what happens to those who disobey God (Mat.11-23-24). As for Jude 7, this account does not have “homosexuality” in view. “The Greek text says ‘literally’ that Sodom and Gomorrah ‘went after *strange flesh*’ (NRSV footnote; italics added), an allusion to the fact that Lot’s guests, unbeknown even to the host himself, were actually angels disguised as men. Thus here, Sodom’s sin is viewed not as males violating other males but as mortals violating immortals.” McNeill (1994: 53-54) seems to agree with Furnish that the history of the interpretation of Gen.19 shows how prejudice and homophobia have distorted the message of scripture. Throughout the Old and New Testaments the sin of Gomorrah was understood as selfishness, pride, neglecting the poor, and lack of hospitality but never as homosexuality. The biblical passages in Ezekiel 16:49-50 and in Luke 10:12 account for that. Historically, the biblical condemnation of

inhospitality was transformed into a condemnation of homosexuality.

Leviticus 18:22; 20:13. These texts form part of what is known as the Holiness Code (which is universally recognised as no longer binding on Christians) and they may also be concerned with male prostitution in foreign cults (Germond 1997: 211-220). When commenting on the holiness code, Nissinen (1998: 44) makes three points:

“The prohibition of sexual contact between males in the Holiness Code in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 is done in a context of a polemic against a non-Israelite cult. Because the records of cultic homoeroticism are scanty and not unequivocal, however, historical description of this context is difficult.

The strategy of postexilic Israelites to maintain their distinct identity by, among other ways, separating from others strengthened the already existing taboos and social standards regarding sexual behaviour and gender roles, banning, for instance, castration, cross-dressing, and male same-sex behaviour; it was not simply the “objective” facts of physiology that established gender identity.

Israel shared with its cultural environment an understanding of sexual life as an interaction between active masculine and passive feminine gender roles. This interaction was the cornerstone of gender identity, but the concept of sexual orientation was unknown. Sexual contact between two men was prohibited because the passive party assumed the role of a woman and his manly honor was thus disgraced.”

I Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. Here, Germond (1997:224) deals with the meaning of the two words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* and he concludes that these terms should not be given a translation indicating explicit and exclusive homosexual behaviour. Further, Paul’s intention when making use of such a rare word (*arsenokoitai*) is not clear. Even so, it cannot be ascertained that he meant to refer to homosexuality.

Romans 1:18-32. This biblical text does not condemn homosexual activity as a violation of God’s created order but as idolatry which is one of the many consequences of sin.

Nelson (1978: 184- 87) asserts that the bible never speaks of homosexuality as

a sexual orientation. It makes references to the subject but on certain kinds of homosexual acts that are probably believed to have been undertaken by persons whom the writers of the bible presumed to be heterosexually constituted. Nelson interprets Genesis 19:1-29 as God's judgement on sacral male prostitution - which includes homosexual rape - that is anathematized and which involves the cultic worship of foreign Gods denying Yahweh's exclusive claim. If one is fair to the text, one will find extreme difficulty to construe this text as a judgement against all homosexual activity. Cultic defilement is also Nelson's interpretation of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. In Romans 1:18-32, the same issue seems to be at stake, idolatry. It is true that Paul does not look at homosexual acts with favour, however if our understanding of homosexuality, its nature and consequences has changed over the times, then our understanding of the issue today differs from Paul's understanding of the issue then. Paul's other reference to homosexual acts and that of the writer of 1 Timothy is a list of practices which dishonour God and harm the neighbour and excludes people from the kingdom. Homosexual acts are not singled out for special censure.

4.2.2 The wider biblical framework

Germond (1997:203) makes use of a theology of inclusion, the theology by which all biblical texts should be evaluated. A lesbian or gay person is neither redeemed by the interpretations of the bible nor even by the bible itself but by Christ. There are "messages of inclusivity that lie at the heart of the bible transcending the culturally bound messages that marginalise women, slaves, and gay and lesbian people". In the same line of thinking, Nelson (1978:188) affirms that we are all justified by the Grace of God in Jesus Christ. If at present, the norm of the new humanity in Jesus Christ, our best current moral wisdom and empirical knowledge cause us to question some of Paul's moral convictions on the status of women and the institution of human slavery, why should his judgements about homosexual acts be exempt?

One can easily notice the deep theological divide we find on our way in the search of a Christian ethos on human sexuality. Does the church need some help? Perhaps from other fields of study? Will they be sufficient to solve the problem we are living today? These questions are further explored in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

SCIENTIFIC, MEDICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES ARGUMENTS

5.1 Scientific and Medical Arguments

Can science really help the church in the moral debate over the practice of homosexuality? Is there such a thing as a gay gene? Can homosexuality be explained by genetics? Is such behaviour influenced by nature or nurture? Is it inborn or learned? This chapter is an exposition of what scientific studies (medical and social sciences) have been up to in trying to find the causes of homosexuality and its influence on public policy.

Jones and Workman (1994: 94) assert that the removal of homosexuality from the list of pathological psychiatric conditions in 1974 by the American psychiatric Association is cloudy. It “was an action taken with such unconventional speed that normal channels for considerations of the issues were circumvented”. Nelson (1978: 193) maintains that there is no general agreement about the causes of homosexuality. The psychogenic and the genetic approaches - which remain in dispute - are the two major approaches the main theories gather around. Jones and Workman conclude on the causes of homosexuality that there is a general consensus that no theory of homosexuality can explain such a diverse phenomenon. It seems that the genetic or hormonal cause of homosexual orientation is not completely determinative. Rather, psychological, familial, and cultural influences seem to be as important here. Some researchers have admitted that when we know more about the causes of heterosexuality then we shall know more about the causes of homosexuality. For Nelson, at least one thing is increasingly clear: sexual orientation is relatively fixed by early childhood through processes about which the individual makes no conscious choice, and if that is so, then it is not easily reversed.

Some people believe that one way of knowing whether homosexuality is biologically natural or not is by observing the animal world. Some studies seem to have proved that homosexuality exists in the animal world (see for instance in this regard the Kinsey report). The result of these studies presumes that homosexuality is natural for the simple fact that it is not only present in the world of humans but of animals too. However, the challenge posed to the findings of such authors is that humans are rational and

animals are not. Therefore, the question of choice or decision making is not present in the animal world.

According to the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* (2005), Bailey's behavioural genetics studies of sexual orientation in twins and other siblings (Bailey and Pillard, 1991 and Bailey et al., 1993) seemed to have found solid evidence that genetics do influence the formation of homosexual orientation. Both studies were severely criticized by Jones and Yarhouse on the grounds that they used population estimates for that research on potentially biased samples. They used samples recruited from advertisements in gay publications. It is important to note that the study of Kendler, Thornton, Gilman, and Kessler (2000) paralleled Bailey's work having the same fatal flaws in its research.

Some studies believed to support biological theories of sexual orientation are reported to have found difference in homosexual and heterosexual brains where gay men and heterosexual women have similar spatial learning and memory abilities differing from heterosexual men (Rahman and Koerting, 2008). A parallel study found that straight men and lesbian women, and gay men and straight women have similar brain structures (Savic and Lindstrom, 2008).



The famous Kinsey Institute report is often cited as evidence that 10% of the population is homosexual. Many have used the Kinsey report to change the public view on homosexuality. In his book, *Is It a Choice?: Answers to 300 of the Most Frequently Asked Questions About Gays and Lesbians*, Eric Marcus (1993), used the Kinsey studies to demonstrate that one in ten people are homosexual. Harrub, Thompson and Miller state that Kinsey never reported figures that high. The Kinsey Report clearly stated that: "Only about 4 percent of the men (evaluated) were exclusively homosexual throughout their entire lives... Only 2 or 3 percent of these women were exclusively homosexual their entire lives" (Reinisch and Beasley, 1990:140). Still, conservative researchers seem to have good reasons to believe that the real percentage is not even this high. This crucial aspect seems to be in need of more thorough research.

Thirty one homosexual and pro-homosexual groups admitted that the most widely accepted study of sexual practices in the United States is the National Health and Social

Life Survey (NHSLs) which found that 2.8% of the male and 1.4% of the female population identify themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. It also showed that only 0.9% of men and 0.4% of women reported having only same-sex partners since age 18 (Laumann, et al. 1994: 306-9) - a figure that would represent a total of only 1.4 million Americans as homosexual (based on the last census report, showing roughly 292 million people living in America) . Harrub, Thompson and Miller (2003) argue that the resulting accurate figures demonstrate that significantly less than one percent of the American population claims to be homosexual. The NHSLs results are similar to a survey conducted by the Minnesota Adolescent Health Survey (1986) of public school students. The survey showed that only 0.6% of the boys and 0.2% of the girls identified themselves as “mostly or 100% homosexual.” The 2000 census sheds even more light on the subject. The overall statistics from the 2000 Census Bureau revealed that the total population of the U.S. is 285,230,516. The total number of households in the U.S. is 106,741,426. The total number of unmarried same-sex households is 601,209. Thus, out of a population of 106,741,426 households, homosexuals represent 0.42% of those households. That is less than one half of a per cent.

The statistics from the 2000 census are not figures grabbed from the air and placed on a political sign or Web site to promote a particular agenda. These were census data that were carefully collected from the entire United States population, contrary to the limited scope of studies designed to show a genetic cause for homosexuality.

Jones and Yarhouse (2000) examine the cause of homosexuality. The pro-homosexual movement often appeals to the findings of science to demonstrate that homosexuality is not freely chosen, theories that have been influencing public policy on this matter because for society if this is so, then any argument that expressions of homosexuality are freely chosen is refuted as scientifically false. Jones and Yarhouse survey various psychological/environmental theories such as psychoanalytic theory and childhood experience, and biological theories – focusing on adult and prenatal hormones, direct and indirect genetic factors - and the scientific evidence supporting all these theories. They argue that the biological theories research is inconclusive. However, they note that there is a substantial amount of research on psychological/environmental factors which appears promising but because of the emphasis on the biological factors, it is ignored,

probably due to political forces. Jones and Yarhouse, like many other experts in the area hold the view that various factors (psychological, environmental, biological and human choice), contribute to homosexual orientation. This hypothesis recognizes that there may be predispositions and experiences that may influence the homosexual orientation but not one alone can cause one to be a homosexual. In other words, human choice is the decisive factor, even if there is mounting evidence supporting causal influence. Human actions are never simply the result of deterministic causes. Jones and Yarhouse insist that inclinations and predispositions neither render human choice irrelevant, nor do they remove the need for the moral evaluation of human actions.

Another scientific issue examined is the question of whether homosexuality is a psychopathology. The decisive event to which pro-homosexual groups appeal is the decision in 1974 by the membership of the American Psychiatric Association to remove homosexuality from its list of pathological psychiatric conditions. But Jones and Yarhouse note that this decision did not result from new scientific or clinical studies but from a hastily organized vote of the membership of the APA in response to explicit threats made against it by gay rights groups. The authors point out that when studies are done of samples of homosexuals that are representative of *all* homosexuals (not merely the “healthy” ones), one finds higher rates of personal distress, psychiatric disorder, and maladaptiveness among homosexuals than among heterosexuals. Male homosexuals also show a reduced capacity for long-term relationships and a greater propensity for promiscuous behaviour. “Can orientation be altered?” is another question investigated by Jones and Yarhouse -,one that is highly charged, politically and ideologically. Pro-homosexual groups tend to deny that any change of true homosexuals is possible, whereas some Christian groups teach that change for Christians is always possible. The authors survey the various studies that have been done, noting that there is good evidence that some level of change can be expected for homosexuals who pursue therapy, on average about 33%. It is certainly clear that, given the reports of successful change examined by various studies, the position that homosexuality is unchangeable is untenable. But what Jones and Yarhouse conclude is that the issue of change is irrelevant for the issue of Christian obedience. Even if homosexuals were not able to change from same-sex preferences or attraction, God’s standard requires sexual abstinence for them, just as it does for unmarried heterosexuals. They argue that scientific knowledge about homosexuality cannot be used to reject the traditional Christian position;

the origins of homosexuality are still unknown; and that the findings on the origin and possibilities for change are irrelevant for Christian ethics. The pursuit of a holy life demands sexual purity as God has revealed in his Word.

5.2 Social Arguments

Bailey and his colleagues performed studies on twins to determine the genetic basis of homosexuality, which reported that the more closely genetically related two siblings were, the more likely they were to share a sexual orientation. Social theories however underline that identical twins share much more than genetics. They share many more experiences than do other kind of siblings. The weakness of Bailey's study is that it cannot determine how much of the concordance is due to genetic factors and how much is due to having grown up under similar environmental influences. Many authors seem to agree that if there had ever been something like a "gay gene", it would have disappeared long ago for the simple fact that homosexuals have been less likely to have children (Carroll 2010:283).

Despite the serious scientific flaws found in studies claiming the existence of a "gay gene", news reports on alleged biological bases for homosexuality are very common which accounts for the growing public belief in the biological basis of homosexuality. Andersen and Taylor (2008: 334) claim that there is far more evidence for a social basis for the development of homosexuality (see Gagnon 1995, 1997; Caufield 1985; Money 1995) and if these evidences received the same loud acclaim the biological theories do, the public might be less inclined to think that sexual identity has a biological origin. Sociologists say that even if there existed biological influence on homosexuality, social experiences are far more significant in shaping sexual identities (Connel 1992; Lorber 1994; Brookley 2001), because social influences interact with biological foundations playing an important part in creating the various dimensions of sexual identity. From a sociological perspective, sexual identity is not inborn; it develops through social experiences and biological processes. In other words, the social world tends to mould biology as much as biology shapes human sexuality. Carroll (2010) discusses some social theories and their assessment of homosexuality:

Behaviourist theories consider homosexuality a learned behaviour caused by

the pleasant reinforcement of homosexual behaviours and the negative reinforcement of heterosexual behaviour.

Sociological theories look at how social forces produce homosexuality in a society. They attest that concepts such as homosexuality, bisexuality and heterosexuality are products of our society and depends on how society defines things. The idea of homosexuality is a product of a particular culture at a particular time. Though the behaviour existed, its idea did not until the 19th century. It is said that the use of the term homosexuality came into existence only after the industrial revolution. Thus, the idea that people are either heterosexual or homosexual is not a biological fact but a way of thinking that develops as social conditions change.

The *interactional theory* states that homosexuality is the result of a complex interaction of biological, psychological, and social factors. A child may be born and exposed to prenatal hormones predisposing him or her to a particular sexual orientation but this predisposition is either facilitated or inhibited in conjunction with social experiences.

Quite a good number of authors seem to agree that at present the scientific world presents a cloudy picture on the debate. Up to date, not one scientist has been able to prove that homosexuality is biologically caused. What does that mean for the church? Does it mean that the church can go on condemning homosexuality for the fact that science cannot prove that homosexuality is not biologically caused? Does the church base its moral decision making on results from science?

CHAPTER 6

HUMAN AND CIVIL RIGHTS PERSPECTIVES

6.1 What are Human Rights?

“Human Rights” is a relatively new expression that came into everyday usage since World War II and the founding of the United Nations in 1945. The Universal Declaration of Human rights (UDHR) was signed by the United Nations General Assembly on December 10, 1948, based on four essential human freedoms: freedom of speech and expression; freedom for every person to worship God in their own way; freedom from want; and freedom from fear. Human Rights expression has replaced the expression “natural rights” which fell into disfavour because of its great controversy (Steiner & Alston 2000:324). Human rights are “basic rights and freedoms to which all humans are entitled.” Proponents of the concept usually assert that all humans are endowed with certain entitlements merely by reason of being human.

The UDHR was a resolution and not a treaty and thus it is not legally binding. However, over time, the General Assembly adopted two treaties - the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - that gave human rights binding force internationally. These three documents together with a collection of human rights instruments are known as the International Bill of Human Rights (Hayden, 2001: 371).

Human rights are thus conceived in a universalist and egalitarian fashion. Such entitlements can exist as shared norms of actual human moralities, as justified moral norms or natural rights supported by strong reasons, or as legal rights either at a national level or within international law. However, there is no consensus as to precise nature of what in particular should or should not be regarded as a human right in any of the preceding senses and the abstract concept of human rights has been a subject of intense philosophical debate and criticism.²⁴

²⁴ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_rights retrieved on October 1st, 2010 (18h00)

Hayden (2001: 371-2) says that Universalism endorses the universal character of human rights norms while relativism endorses moral norms as historically and culturally determined, not universal. The debate between the former and the latter points “to the tensions that can exist between the desire to respect the rights of every individual, regardless of their race, sex, religion and nationality, and the desire to respect differences between cultures and nations that may not be easily reconciled with the universal prescriptions of human rights”.

Sobrinho quotes from a lecture Ignacio Ellacuria (1990: 590) gave in 1989, just before his assassination, where he stated:

The problem of human rights is not only complex but also ambiguous, because within it not only does the universal dimension of man meet with the actual situation in which man's lives are lived, but it tends to be used ideologically in the service not of man and his rights, but rather in the interests of one group or another.

The complexity of the Human Rights concept is another aspect accounting for the complexity of the homosexuality debate. The secular world we live in has moved into a more permissive direction, one that is in most cases not in accordance with the church traditions or tenets.

The institutionalization of religious belief or practice, and human rights norms is a topic that has always generated much controversy. On one side, religious beliefs and human rights are seen as complementary expressions of similar ideas, since important aspects of major religious traditions reinforce many basic human rights. On the other side, religious traditions may interfere with human rights for the fact that religious leaders assert the primacy of religious beliefs over human rights. The notion of cultural relativism is present here. “If notions of state sovereignty represent one powerful concept and a force that challenges and seeks to limit the reach of the international human rights movement, religion can then represent another” (Steiner & Alston 2000:445).

The distinctive fact about religion is that it deals with issues on the basis of faith rather than reason. Macklem (2006: xi) puts it this way:

Faith is valuable as and when it enables us to make commitments (including religious commitments) in situations where reasons are unavailable, and so cannot be called upon to guide us, yet the commitment in question is potentially valuable. All ventures into the unknowable, all leaps into the dark, depend on faith.

Such leaps can either be ordinary or fundamental and they commit a person to a view as to the nature and purpose of human life or as to the nature of the good that religion can facilitate. “When religion does this it is entitled to support and protection from a secular society. When it does not do this, it is not entitled to protection, and may even deserve condemnation”. Faith itself provides the moral basis for freedom of religion (Macklem 2006: xi).

The UDHR in its articles 1, 2, 3, 18 and 23 call for freedom and equality in dignity and rights; without discrimination of any kind; the right to life, liberty and security of person; the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, to manifest one’s religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance; the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment. On the one side, there is the right to life, liberty, security of person and right to work. On the other side, there is the right for freedom of religion. In making use of its rights the church promotes the ministry to persons of all sexual orientations, rights of all persons, and opposition to homophobia. Nonetheless, it neither ordains nor marries “self-avowed practicing homosexuals.”²⁵ In the words of Rogers (1994:161), that “is either a blatant example of hypocrisy, or confusion, or something is different here.”

It is neither a blatant example of hypocrisy nor confusion, in my opinion, but a complex and unique dilemma the church is facing in today’s world and addressing it based on what it believes to be right. As result, the church accepts and protects the rights of all people (be it homosexual or heterosexual) but it neither protects nor accepts the practice of homosexuality because it believes that according to scripture, reason, experience and

²⁵ “Self-avowed practicing homosexual” is understood to mean that a person openly acknowledges to a bishop, district superintendent, district committee of ordained ministry, board of ordained ministry, or clergy session that the person is a practicing homosexual. See Judicial Council Decisions 702, 708, 722, 725, 764, 844, 984.

tradition, homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, it is sin, a distortion of human nature. Consequently, the church cannot entrust homosexuals to the highest office in the church or bless their marriage, the same way it does to other people whom the church believes do not behave in accordance with Christian principles.

6.2 Regarding Freedom

Paragraph 162 of the Book of Discipline reads:

We affirm all persons as equally valuable in the sight of God. We therefore work toward societies in which each person's value is recognized, maintained, and strengthened. We support the basic rights of all persons to equal access to housing, education, communication employment, medical care, legal redress for grievances, and physical protection. We deplore acts of hate or violence against groups or persons based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, or economic status.

The Oxford Dictionary defines homophobia as “an extreme and irrational aversion to homosexuality and homosexual people”. Quite a good number of writers in favour of the practice of homosexuality believe that the biblical passages used to condemn the practice of homosexuality are the engineer of homophobia. In his ‘Forward’ to *We Were Baptized Too* (1996), Desmond Tutu called the church’s discrimination against those who practice homosexuality as the ‘ultimate blasphemy’ for the church (far from being inclusive and welcoming of all) has made them aliens in the household of God. “We make the children of God doubt that they are the children of God”. De Gruchy and Germond (1997:3) affirm that there are no biblical or theological grounds on which people should be discriminated, let alone disinherited from God’s household, based on their sexual orientation. There comes the question: would the church’s reproof of the behaviour translate itself into homophobia?

Harrub, Thompson and Miller (2003) deal with this question in the following way:

In order to influence public policy and gain acceptance, homosexual activists often claim that homosexuals deserve equal rights just like other existing minority groups. Often, the fight for the acceptance of homosexuality is compared to civil rights

movements of racial minorities. As consequence of America's failure to settle fully the civil rights issue, homosexual activists (as well as social liberals and feminists) were provided with the perfect 'coat tail' to advance their agenda and used this camouflage to shift attention away from the "behaviour" to the "rights". The argumentation: we were born homosexuals and cannot help it the same way a person cannot help being black, female, or Asian and as such we should be treated equally, fails to comprehend the true civil rights movements. Homosexuals enjoy the same civil rights everyone else does. The laws are the same for all members of society and it protects the civil rights of everyone (black, white, male, female, homosexual, or heterosexual). "The contention arises when specific laws deprive all citizens of certain behaviours".

They go on saying that skin colour and other genetic traits can be traced through inheritance patterns and simple genetics. When it comes to homosexuals, they are identified by their actions, not by a trait or a gene. It is only when they alter their behaviour that they become distinguishable from all other people. Consequently, society reproves their behaviour, but not their being. Behind such a reaction lurks the question: Could we just think for a moment what would happen to our societies if people had the freedom to act upon their choices and desires anyway they wanted?

What we most times fail to understand is that both human and civil rights serve the personal well-being of all. Homosexuals are part of society and though they find it worthy to pursue their goals for their well-being, the society in which they live is of the opinion that such a behaviour will endanger the lives of all. After all, these rights claimed by homosexual activists are not individual rights but collective rights. This is where another old adage comes in: "My freedom stops where the freedom of another person starts". Do I have the right to do something that will endanger my life or the lives of others? Surely not. It is on this point where I personally believe that the practice of homosexuality endangers society, and that the caution of the UMC in this regard can be understood.

There are basic human and civil rights entitled to every human being. Such rights maintain, strengthen and dignify our being. We are all entitled to freedom of choice and the church has the same rights. The church has to protect itself (and its members) from bad choices and when it does so, it preserves human nature.

6.3 Regarding Ordination

Paragraph 304.3 of the Book of Discipline of the UMC reads:

While persons set apart by the Church for ordained ministry are subject to all the frailties of the human condition and the pressures of society, they are required to maintain the highest standards of holy living in the world. The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.

This policy of the UMC is in line with the definition of sacramental ministry given by the *New Dictionary of Christian Theology* (1983: 420):

The sacramental ministry of the ordained is to manifest in life and action the ways of Jesus Christ, not simply for the church to be passive recipient of God's grace, but more that the church be led by its ministers to become what is made visible, and to activate in their own lives what their ministers display in their midst. It is in function of this awesome commission of the church to some of its members that the church deems it proper, and indeed essential, to lay on hands and to entrust the minister and the ministry to the power of God's spirit.

6.4 Regarding Marriage

Paragraph 161C of the Book of Discipline states:

We affirm the sanctity of the marriage covenant that is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity between a man and a woman. We believe that God's blessing rests upon such marriage, whether or not there are children of the union. We reject social norms that assume different standards for women than for men in marriage. We support laws in civil society that define marriage as the union of one man and one woman.

On one side, marriage traditionalists - those opposing same-sex marriages - like Finnis, Knight, Stackhouse and Kurtz view marriage as valid only in the heterosexual institution. Marriage is a union between a man and a woman. Such a relationship “must

bring together two differently gendered persons who truly complement each other in body, psyche, and role” (Ellison 2004:59). “When a man and a woman in their differentiation and complementarily see each other as truly other, yet the same as the self (‘flesh of my flesh’ [Genesis 2:20-23]), they are no longer bound only to previous kin relationships. They are invited to form new intimate bonds without guilty” (Stackhouse 1998: 121-122). Kurtz (2001) affirms that the legalization of same -sex marriage will destroy the institution of marriage. “We face legalized polygamy, group marriage, and the eventual legal abolition of marriage itself and its placement by an infinitely flexible contract system”²⁶. For the authors mentioned above, there will be drastic consequences if same-sex marriages gain legal recognition and are religiously affirmed.

On the other side, same sex marriage advocates - such as Rauch, Sullivan, Nussbaum and Maguire - view marriage differently. “Marriage is the highest form of interpersonal commitment and friendship achievable between sexually attracted persons” (Maguire 1997:62). Same-sex marriage advocates assert that marriage is about many things, among them economics, raising children, mutual aid, mutual affection, respect and the desire to be together. There are essential and non-essential aspects in marriage. For example, though children often enhance marital life, they are not essential for fulfilling marital life. The denial of marriage to gay people takes away their citizenship as well as their humanity. It is unjust, discriminative and inconsistent with the widely shared commitment to choice in intimate life (Ellison 2004: 81-82).

Are children not essential for the fulfilment of marital life? Where? In Europe, America, or Africa? How many families are destroyed for not having children? Why do we see gay couples trying to adopt children then?

On this point (the importance of children for a fulfilled marriage) I find the arguments of same-sex marriage advocates weak in the sense that trying to take away some essential aspects of marriage in order to accommodate gay couples seems to be forced, even wrong. What else is not essential? Sex? I once had the opportunity to be part

²⁶ See www.nationalreview.com/contributors/kurtzprint080801.html. retrieved on October 3rd, 2010 (17h00)

of an open conversation with a gay person (Ordained minister of the Methodist Church in South Africa but suspended at that time) at the University of the Western Cape where the minister told us all that she is often asked how she relates sexually with her partner and she said that there are so many other aspects in marriage: why care so much about how they relate sexually?

By stating in Paragraph 161C that “We affirm the sanctity of the marriage covenant that is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity between a man and a woman”, the church is reprovng any type of marriage covenant that does not fulfil such requirements. For example, polygamous, bisexual, same-sex marriages and all others that may be existing all around the world. Same-sex marriages are gaining more legal recognition as time passes on. Conservative church members fear that its religious affirmation would fuel other secular tendencies in the world to the point where neither society nor the church would have control of anything or anybody.



CHAPTER 7

IN SEARCH OF A CHRISTIAN ETHOS ON HUMAN SEXUALITY

7.1 Concluding remarks

The issue of a Christian ethos on sexuality is a very complex one and homosexuality is no exception, as has been illustrated by the arguments considered in this thesis. Perhaps it is so complex because the bible presents no systematic sexual ethic? Like some affirm, the bible only exhibits a variety of sexual mores, some of which changed over the thousand-year span of biblical history. “Mores are unreflective customs accepted by a given community. Many of the practices that the bible prohibits, we allow, and many that it allows, we prohibit. The bible knows only a love ethic, which is constantly being brought to bear on whatever sexual mores are dominant in any given country, or culture, or period” (Rogers 2009: 61-62).

What Rogers says may either be right or wrong. Who will have the last word on the details of a “Christian ethic”? When pro-homosexuals affirm that the church is repeating the same mistakes it did with the slavery issue and discrimination on women, one could question the fairness of such affirmation. Are we comparing apples to apples when we include homosexuals (and homosexuality) as another group of humans being discriminated against?

To answer such questions many more questions need to be asked. Did slavery exist since creation? Was there any inferiority associated with women before the judgment proclaimed to the daughters of Eve in Gen 3:16b?

As society developed and people multiplied on earth, humans created all kinds of relationships pleasurable to them. Where they right in the eyes of God? Is the bible clear about its approval or refusal of such relationships? Perhaps the crux of the problem is found in the fact that the bible is not comprehensive about many issues and still its presentation of some of the issues is dependent on the view of the authors who were not aliens to the communities they were writing to. These authors were born and grew up in those communities, they were familiar with the problems of those communities, and they shared cultures with those communities and did their best to address the issues under

those circumstances.

In the process of God's revelation as recorded in scripture, the Christian church was formed with many teachings that seemed to be new compared with the Old Testament teachings. However, were Jesus' teachings new? He said He did not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it. Since then, the church has been trying to address issues of injustice by spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ that is based in love. It is because of love for God and one another that humanman was able to officially abolish slavery and allow women to be fully included not only in the church but also in society. There was no behaviour on the part of slaves or women that caused scandal upon society or that brought up so many questions about what the future of our societies would be like if slavery was abolished or women were fully included in the ministry. The church understood the message and set people free and it believes to have made the right decision. Likewise, it is now on the hands of the church to decide about the homosexuality dilemma.

Is the problem, as defined and faced today, in the bible? The scriptures have their own complexities but the problem we face today is not in the bible. It is a modern problem, linked to the modern notion of sexual orientation. It is a problem to be faced by Christianity, especially by those who claim to be Christians living in the world today. We as Christians sre not infallible; we keep misunderstanding what God requires of us. From slavery to oppression against women, the church misunderstood its own message, its gospel of love. Was the problem in the bible? No, it was rather in the church. Did not the same happen with the Israelites who could never understand what was required of them; and with the people during Jesus time? His own people did not welcome Him as King because they got it all wrong! Such is still our struggle!

What could we say? How can we look into this ancient book and decipher its unveiling truth? How should we deal with the homosexuality dilemma? Should we ask in this regard the question suggested by our founder, Wesley: Is it essential to the gospel, or non- essential? Can we use Wesley's famous 'quadrilateral' of scripture, reason, tradition and experience? Should we perhaps use Cahill's formula by looking at specific texts on the issue at hand, specific texts on related issues, and general biblical themes or patterns? (Cahill 1994:64). Have we not done it yet? May it be that we are all so busy trying to get *truths* out of the bible but the *truth* that is in the bible we do not get. In other words, we

get out of the bible what we want and that is why it is so difficult for the guiding voice of the Holy Spirit to be heard. Did not God promise us that He would send a Helper, the Holy Spirit to teach us all things (John 14:26 NKJV), to communicate his word and truth to his church?

The Church is the mechanism by which God is setting creation free from its bondage and corruption (Ephesians 3:10-11). The Greek word for Church, *Ekklesia*, literally means called out of, summoned and assembled with a purpose. The church is a vital part of our walk and personal relationships with Jesus. We cannot do it alone. We come to a point where the Holy Spirit puts the church in our hearts, on our agendas. We can see the mighty opposition of all Satan's forces against the church. If we follow in the way that the Holy Spirit leads, God will bring us into ever-increasing order and oneness - oneness with His own mind. As we come into unity with God's mind, we also come into unity with each other. "The Spirit of Christ will lead us to holiness and to become set apart. And the disorders in Jesus' church will fall away, disorders that have been introduced by human ideas. These human-generated disorders will be replaced by the orders of God, which are the orders of Scripture. Then, we will find that, just as the Bible says, the church is the very method by which we come into complete fulfilment and that the total fulfilment consists of the church coming into such unity that the entire church moves as one man. And it moves to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4)."²⁷

The church and the family exist for a purpose. These two are essential to the establishment of the Kingdom of God. All that opposes the order of God comes from the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh.

Perhaps Christian parents should consider this question: How would they react when they discover that they have a homosexual child? If I happened to have an homosexual child, I think I would still love this child with all my heart, because I am a parent and that is the kind of love God has given parents to love their children, unconditionally. Is God any different? His love for each one of his children is incomparable. He looks at us with eyes incomparable to any other and He loves us with

²⁷ <http://www.seekfind.net> retrieved on November 10th 2012, 12H00.

an immeasurable love, despite our sins. My church, the United Methodist Church, has until this day chosen to view homosexuality as one of many other sins in which humans can fall and from which only God's grace and love will free us. The light of his infinite love is manifested in darkness. He expresses his just character by condemning what is wrong and His loving character by condemning to redeem and save.

This has been the consistent message of the church, not only the UMC, but most mainline churches, globally. The question the churches are confronted with, as became clear through this case study, is the following: Has the time not come for the churches to reconsider this traditional application of the gospel of justice and love in the field of human sexuality? Will such a seemingly consistent application cause the church, in this case: the UMC, to split?

7.2 Recommendation for the Church

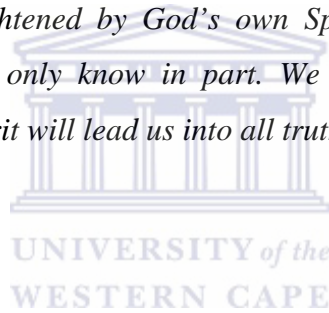
Though we do not always get it right, also in the UMC, we are still the church of God. It is only the church of God through its faith that can venture into the unknown and get answers and even when our human frailties cause us not to understand God, He is still EMMANUEL (God with us). Therefore, God is with us in this struggle as He has been in all other struggles. The church is and should be a symbol of hope for the saved ones.

In which direction do we find hope for homosexual people? The apostle Paul says: "hold on to what you have learnt, do not despise it." Applying this to the issue at stake a majority, especially from Africa and the third world, argues that the church has to hold on to its principles, the stand of the UMC which finds the practice of homosexuality incompatible with Christian teachings. They then argue that this principled position should reflect the action of the church in this struggle, in its day to day business, from church trials to counseling and ministering those who are in favor of the practice of homosexuality. Consistency would give the church more authority and would lead us to finding a way of not having this dilemma discussed at every General Conference as it has been happening for more than thirty years.

A growing, alternative voice within the church is developing a quite different argument, on the basis of new hermeneutical insights, new understandings of sexuality and sexual orientation, as undergirded by medical and scientific knowledge of the human

being, and a global human rights culture – as shown in this study. The UMC now finds itself in a “great theological divide” on this issue but it has been trying to hold together for the sake of unity. It is clear from the reluctance of church bodies, disciplinary hearings, and the many finely tuned decisions of the church through many years, that a final division is avoided at all costs. However, fundamental (and in some cases: fundamentalist) understandings of sexuality, mixed with cultural traditions and an evangelical brand of Christianity, especially coming from Africa and other third world contexts, may lead to insurmountable differences within the UMC. It is very difficult to predict for how much longer the church will be able to keep its “household” together. We need to remember that after all is said and done, it remains God’s church, God’s people. God has summoned us for a purpose and so this is also God’s struggle!

Human theology and reasoning is not infallible; Christians rely on God’s revelation in the Bible, as this is enlightened by God’s own Spirit. However, in spite of God’s trustworthy revelation we only know in part. We are instructed, by God, to keep seeking Him. The Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth.²⁸



²⁸ Ibid.

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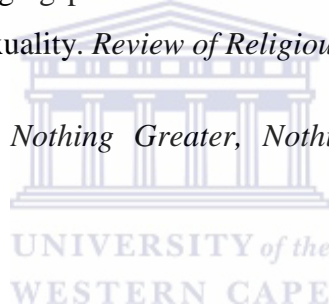
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