

ENGENDERED DANGER AND ENDANGERED GENDER: THE CHURCH AND HOMOSEXUAL CLERGY – A CASE STUDY

Douglas Pratt
Department of Philosophy
University of Waikato, New Zealand

Abstract

The issue of homosexuality is vexing the church throughout much of the world and seems to be most heated around the issue of clergy. Negative reactions to the prospect of the church endorsing homosexual clergy appear to suggest that such clergy pose a sort of 'engendered danger' to the very being of the church. Equally, these reactions give the impression that gay clerics are themselves something of an 'endangered gender'. By taking as my starting point the situation in respect to the New Zealand Methodist Church, I propose to comment on the theme of danger / endangerment that is posed by the issue of clerical homosexuality, and to review a theological approach that might allow for the amelioration of danger and allow for the legitimate acceptance of homosexuality within the church.

Introduction

The 1997 Annual Conference of the Methodist church in New Zealand enacted a decision *de facto* to publicly receive and endorse a practising male homosexual minister who had been previously ordained within another denomination. There was no determination of principle, let alone theological rationale offered. Rather a procedural mechanism was simply invoked in an effort to obtain a novel outcome without having to engage with substantive objection and reservation. Understandably, a storm of dissent, disruption, and legal wrangling has since been unleashed.

In respect to the Methodist position and action taken, two distinct but interrelated theological issues deserve careful consideration. One has to do with ecclesiology, namely the institutional praxis and policy that enabled such action to occur in the first place and which, on close inspection, suggests that the Conference enacted a form of procedural injustice, the ramifications of which are still being played out. The second issue is juridical in nature and involves the validity, or otherwise, of the Conference action, or determination, with respect to Methodist doctrinal polity.

In this paper I shall briefly describe the ecclesial action that occurred, offer some theological critique of that action, outline a particular theological methodology that holds the prospect of a balanced approach to rethinking the issue of homosexuality, and finally suggest a prospective way forward. In all I am seeking to suggest a line of theological response that could be germane not just to Methodism in New Zealand but to the church at large. For both the nature of the issue itself and the nature of the theological methodology applied are not limited to one expression of the Body of Christ. The issue and its potential theological resolution is a task confronting the whole church in our day. I am not myself opposed to gay clergy, and I do believe the Christian church, on the whole, has yet to properly accommodate a contemporary understanding of homosexuality as something quite other than what the biblical writers, and indeed much church opinion since, refer to in such

condemnatory tones. The task of formulating a theology of homosexuality that would be required is formidable but, I suggest, not impossible.

For historians, sociologists, and scholars of religion generally, as well as the theologian in particular, there is now a veritable quarry to mine for not only academic interest but also, hopefully, the edification of the wider church. My own concerns, brought about by a specific challenge that has been put to me, have been to explore question such as when a church undertakes a radically new action in respect to ordering its own life, but without proffering a theological rationale or apologia for so doing, how does that square with its own mandate to maintain the integrity of its tradition and identity? What are the consequences of enacting ecclesial innovation without any substantially argued ecclesiological and theological support? Could such support have been forthcoming? Could it yet? But first I need to address the question of how the action taken by the Methodists in New Zealand arose in the first place.

I.

In 1997 I was myself a member of the Conference and, as a theologian, dismayed at how the issue was handled.¹ It certainly distressed me to be part of a church community that had effectively chosen to give away the ability to discuss, debate, and make appropriately theological determinations in the outworking of its contemporary life of faith. My problem was not whether or not homosexuals should be admitted to ministry but that, as a church, no theological determination to do so, or not to do so, was made at the crucial time. I was aware of likely theological consequences and ecclesial fall-out (although not at that stage as fully cognizant of the extent of these issues as I am now).

Expelled from the ministry of his former church (namely, the Baptists), and continuing to profess an active homosexual life, the individual in question around whom the issue has swung – without doubt a gifted scholar and pastor – sought to have his ministry affirmed within Methodism. He was initially employed in a ‘supply’ situation, which itself occasioned negative reactions, but because he was not then formally admitted into the Methodist Connexion as such, the issue of acceptability or otherwise was largely skirted. By 1997, however, he was the choice of the church’s leadership for a significant appointment which required him to be fully and legally a Methodist minister. For this, the Methodists did not need to re-ordain him. However, the process known as ‘Reception into Full Connexion’ was certainly required. This is the uniquely Methodist liturgical-performative rite, which occurs in the course of the annual Conference, wherein an individual, having been duly screened and tested, is deemed fully acceptable to then function as a minister of this church. Normally an individual is so affirmed and endorsed just prior to ordination.

Within the life of any organisation there are procedural and formal items of business which must be enacted, and which, by their very nature, normally attract no dissent or opposition. At the annual Methodist Conference the act of receiving a group of persons into Full Connexion is one such procedural item. The enacting motion is normally moved *pro forma* by the Chair (i.e., the President of the Conference when chairing, or his / her substitute such as the Vice-President) by way of reading out, or referring to, the list of persons who have been successfully processed through the church’s mechanisms as being appropriately fit and ready for the Conference to formally endorse them. In this instance, however, the Conference leadership, in the end, simply included the name of the gay cleric

1. I have since left the Methodist church, but only in part because of this issue. I am now an Anglican Priest and Canon Theologian in the Diocese of Waikato, New Zealand.

on the list and, in putting the procedural motion asserted that no one name could be challenged: the Conference had to endorse all or none. The latter option was, of course, untenable for it would have then prevented the annual ordination service taking place and, further, this would have serious consequences for the matter of the church fulfilling its commitments with respect to the stationing of clergy in parishes for the coming year. The Conference had no choice but to affirm the procedural motion and, in so doing, effect the acceptance of the gay minister irrespective of any other consideration.

Arguably, by virtue of the use of the formal mechanism the Conference was led into a position of procedural injustice: bureaucratic processes were utilised to ensure an apparently pre-determined outcome. Conference neither democratically decided the issue by majority decision in favour, nor conceded to it according to the canons of consensus decision-making procedures which had, since the mid-1980s, been the normative decision-making *modus operandi* of the Conference. So, not only was the possibility of substantive debate precluded at a crucial point, the contemporary context of consensus-seeking discussion was itself vitiated. For this consensus procedure – designed to ensure no significant disenfranchisement of any constituency of a community using the procedure – was summarily set aside in favour of a move to effect an outcome about which there could be no doubt (at least, presumably, from the point of view of the church leadership) and to the lasting distress of all who felt either their faith in the consensus model had been betrayed, and / or that the church, in precluding the Westminster style of debate and issue resolution completely, was now bereft of any effective means of adequately resolving highly contentious issues.

A fuller review of the procedures and institutional context² involved in the reception into Full Connexion of a gay cleric suggests a number of key interrelated factors which together allowed the action to take place. These include, as noted above, the action taken to subsume the substantive issue within a procedural motion, hedged by a contentious and arguably *ultra vires* injunction from the Chair that precluded further debate; second, recourse to the Human Rights Act that was taken by the church as excusing it from formulating a theological determination in respect of homosexual ministers; third, the determining power of Conference in respect of novel development *per se* strengthened by a prior (1993) Presidential ruling that hedged the role of recourse to Methodist origins, namely with respect to its founder, John Wesley, in formulating policy and practice; and finally the overriding of the processes of consensus decision-making, processes which had been adopted by the church as part of its response to the New Zealand bi-cultural context.

Significantly and critically, in respect of the 1997 decision, no direct decision about the pastoral and theological propriety or otherwise of active homosexuals in ministry was taken by the Conference. The question of congruency with foundational doctrinal perspectives is open because it was not addressed. So far as I am aware – and there has been no evidence to the contrary in the published proceedings of Conference since 1997 – the Methodists have yet to decide on this issue, certainly in any open or publicly argued sense.

II.

The *Laws and Regulations* of the Methodist church state unequivocally that the Conference has overriding governing authority for the church as a whole.³ The annual Conference is the

2. This is undertaken in my forthcoming paper 'An Ecclesial Dilemma for New Zealand Methodism: Homosexual Affirmation and Procedural Injustice.'

3. *Laws and Regulations of the Methodist church of Aotearoa-New Zealand*, Section 5.1.1.

court of final and binding decisions for the church. Significantly, however, the authority of the Conference is hedged in by reference to the foundational doctrines and rules of the church.⁴ Specifically, the Conference has no power to alter, revoke, or in any way change the doctrines of the church as given in its own founding sources, namely John Wesley's *Notes on the New Testament*⁵ and his *Standard Sermons*.⁶ There are also further caveats in respect to specific matters of the duties and rights of clergy and church members.⁷ Another section has been added in recent times to ensure that the Conference shall act also in accord with the supposed principles of the Treaty of Waitangi,⁸ the 1840 compact that formalised the partnership relation between the British crown and the indigenous Maori people. On any issue of challenge to, or critical examination of, a Conference decision or action, these governing legal clauses apply, whether severally or together.

The crisis that in recent years has reverberated through the Methodist church of New Zealand is not only a matter of ecclesial politics and jurisdiction, it is very much a theological crisis, and one to which other church communities could be similarly susceptible. There are three components to this crisis. In the first instance there is the question of homosexuality in ministry as itself a doctrinal matter: does its proclaimed acceptability by a Methodist Conference contravene traditional church doctrine as bequeathed by John Wesley, or not? The answer to this has a legal implication with respect to the limitations on Conference action as noted above. Second, there is the matter that, in consequence of the action taken there have been major internal upheavals resulting in clerical resignations and congregational departures on the one hand, through to High Court hearings seeking injunctions against the church on the other. Did the ecclesial action transgress other central doctrines of the Methodist church and, if so, which ones and in what sense? And, third, there is the matter of principle concerning the implication of a church, indeed any church, undertaking significant and clearly contentious action in respect to its own inner life and identity without, in so doing, offering a clear and soundly argued theological rationale. Arguably, had the church done that then perhaps some of the subsequent upheavals may well have been avoided. Certainly the extent of dissension may well have been ameliorated, and at the very least the church would not have exposed itself to the depth of legal action it has faced, and is likely yet to face.

The critical doctrinal issue arising from the action taken to receive and endorse a practicing homosexual person into the ranks of ordained clergy, which has been raised both theoretically and also legally, can be stated as follows.

Whether, in respect to the doctrines of the church as contained in the *Standard Sermons* of John Wesley and his *Notes on the New Testament*, the Methodist Conference can be said to have revoked, altered, or changed any such doctrine, or established contrary doctrine.

From one perspective, of course, it could be argued that there has been no direct revocation of *specific* doctrine as such – primarily because neither Wesley himself, nor his church subsequently, ever formulated a direct doctrinal statement on homosexuality, let alone on gay clergy as such. Nonetheless, it would appear that the action taken by the Conference to admit as a minister in full connexion a practising homosexual did, in fact, call into question the fidelity of the church to certain of its foundational doctrines. For the effect of the action

4. *Laws* 5.1.2(a) & (b).

5. E.g., John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*. Wakefield: William Nicholson and Sons, 1872.

6. See for example: John Wesley *Forty-Four Sermons*. London: Epworth Press, 1944; EH Sugden, ed., *The Standard Sermons of John Wesley*. 2 Vols. London: Epworth Press, 1921; 1956.

7. *Laws* 5.1.2(c) & (d).

8. *Laws* 5.1.3.

has been, arguably, to alter and change certain doctrinal positions as set forth in John Wesley's *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament* and his published *Standard Sermons*. By implication of the action taken, and the dissension it immediately provoked, some form of alteration or change to, or implicit abrogation of, Wesleyan doctrine certainly seems to have occurred.

In order to elaborate on this it is necessary to examine references to homosexuality as found in John Wesley's *Notes* and to examine the matter of the bearing of Wesley's views on homosexuality in respect to key doctrinal positions that are expressed in his sermons. The critical task is to identify the relevant doctrine and determine the extent of any implicit abrogation.

In commenting on a number of New Testament passages which contain references to homosexual behaviour Wesley reveals himself to be a man of his time in so far as his negative views reflect the then received tradition. It needs to be noted that Wesley himself did not use the word 'homosexual' – it was not a term in his day – and certainly gives no indication of considering it the complex phenomenon that would be the case in our day. For the most part Wesley, in keeping with then contemporary views, simply refers to the sexual behaviour of sodomy – it is to 'sodomites' that he in fact refers. Opinions on morals and behaviour do not, of themselves, constitute 'doctrine' *per se*. But such opinions may, and in Wesley's case clearly do, reflect and express a doctrinal position.

The point of Wesley's remarks is not simply a negative judgement on homosexuality as a moral issue, but that homosexual practices are themselves expressive of sin or sinful behaviour. For Wesley homosexuality *per se* is a manifestation of sinful behaviour and so of sin: in one comment⁹ sodomy is classified as "unnatural lust" though by no means the only instance of such lust. The doctrinal import is not so much on homosexuality itself, but that certain behavioural expressions identified as homosexual are illustrative of, and manifest, sin. The upshot, of course, is to equate homosexuality *per se* with sinfulness. That Wesley treats homosexuality in relation to his doctrines of both sin and salvation is evidenced in his comments on 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. Homosexual activity is again classed as an extreme form of sin. However, Wesley's point is that such is the grace and favour of God that even great sin can merit forgiveness.

The doctrinal position of Christian lifestyle in the Wesleyan context clearly has a bearing on the issue of homosexuality, in particular as applied to ministers of the church. Wesley viewed homosexual behaviour as a particular and exemplary manifestation of the sinful human condition, which condition the Methodist minister was clearly charged with abrogating by virtue of living a particular kind of life. Such a life is to be marked by the doctrines of sanctification and holiness etc., which together give evidence of a life of growing into Christian perfection. In contemporary language this could be rendered as living an intentional life of Christian values and morality. By implication, therefore, the Conference act of reception into full connexion of a practising homosexual minister can be deemed to have altered, if not abrogated, Wesley's doctrinal perspective in respect of homosexuality as sinful.

Furthermore, the *manner* wherein the determination was made by the New Zealand Conference implicitly signalled some sort of alteration to Wesley's distinctive doctrinal focus upon the church as 'fellowship'. Any action which is inherently deleterious to the life and unity of the church, yet which is sanctioned by the church courts – specifically the Conference – implies necessarily, by the very fact of being sanctioned, an implicit or *de*

9. With respect to Jude, verse 7.

facto alteration or change to Wesley's doctrinal emphasis, for the church is effectively acting against itself with respect to its core doctrinally sanctioned life. In this case, the Conference's sanctioning act in respect to endorsing homosexual clergy negatively impacted – and it was indeed anticipated this would be the case – on the fellowship of the church. If, arguably, grace and *koinonia* are taken as denoting the *modus vivendi* of the Methodist church, then without doubt this modality was deeply disrupted. The manifest breakdown in relationships within the life of the church and the departure of both clergy and congregations is evidence of the depth of this disruption.

Indeed, it was estimated by those in attendance that some 40% of the members of the 1997 Conference opposed the move to endorse homosexuality in ministry. Significantly, they represented a sizeable evangelical constituency in the church and the entire Polynesian bloc – Fijian, Tongan, Samoan – which, together, represent a substantial proportion of the national membership of the church. All these sub-communities within the church were disenfranchised by the manner and result of the Conference action and their continuing allegiance to and membership within the Methodist church was clearly placed at risk. Some have since left, others may yet do so. No other single action in recent New Zealand Methodist history that I am aware of has threatened the fellowship and unity of the church in New Zealand as has this one: the fact and manner of the action is as much a doctrinal concern as the substantial issue of homosexuality itself, if not more so.

III.

The philosopher Plato once stated that the unexamined life is not worth living. In the church, the theologically unexamined, un-argued, and therefore implicit or default decision is not worth having. The problem, in this regard, is not whether or not homosexuals should be admitted to ministry as such but that, as a church, no theological determination to do so, or not to do so, was made at the crucial time. Such an omission both devalues the theological integrity of the church – indeed any church that so acts – and opens the door to litigious dissent. For when theology fails, the court is looked to for remedy: Spirit gives way to Letter; Grace gives way to Law. In so acting – or rather, with regard to theology, not acting – as it did the Conference breached its own legal caveat and its own doctrinal standards. Arguably, it could have been otherwise had a theological apologia formulated along the abovementioned lines been proffered. But the fact is, that is not the case. However, need this be the last word?

There is certainly mounting pressure, and good grounds, for the equal treatment of persons in regard to ministry vocations irrespective of sexual orientation, just as there have been, for many churches, successful moves to overcome a previously entrenched gender barrier in respect to women ministers, priests, and in some cases bishops. Nevertheless, even more than with the question of ordaining women to the ministry, there is a legacy of biblical injunction and interpretation, as well as a history of ecclesial prejudice and naïve assumptions about the meaning of homosexuality, that militate against any easy resolution to this particular issue.

Biblical condemnation rightly judges perverse behaviours in the context of manifest injustice and the break-down of relationship. That includes, but is by no means limited to, some expressions of homosexual behaviour. But that is not all that can now be said about homosexuality. Clearly there are homosexual persons who are as spiritually sensitive, open and responsive to the call of God as anyone else. Much careful theological analysis, deconstruction, and reconstruction of the issue of homosexuality and church ministry is required. It is a continuing task and challenge to the church at large.

At this juncture I shall outline, and offer a limited application of, a particular theological methodology, viz., that of John Wesley himself, the founder of Methodism. It may yet offer a way forward for a Methodist resolution of the core issue of the acceptability of gay persons within the ranks of ordained clergy. Of course, Wesley was himself an Anglican priest. Any contemporary contribution that reference to Wesley's own work and thought may make need not be seen, let alone dismissed, as a parochially denominational one. The methodology he adumbrated is a balanced and grounded platform upon which much useful theological critique, and construction, may be founded.

John Wesley's methodology is succinctly summarised as a 'quadrilateral' that sees theological reflection as an ongoing engagement of ecclesial praxis with the milieu of scripture, tradition, reason and experience.¹⁰ It is a methodology that applies – or should apply – to the development of ideas, as well as practices, in the life of the church. Arguably, Wesley's theology advanced an understanding of the grace of God as the single most important present and relevant reality in human life. His theology promoted catholicity of spirit, that sense of universal inclusiveness found in Christ – the Christ who excludes no one who has responded to the divine saving grace – upon which foundation the values and emphases of fellowship, social outreach, and evangelical proclamation, have rested. The application of the distinctive Wesleyan methodology might yet allow for the development of a valid theological position supportive of gay clergy in the life of the church.

This methodological quadrilateral¹¹ proceeds by way of engaging in theological reflection and construction through the interplay of

... a four-fold combination of the witness of scripture soundly exegeted and interpreted; the witness of the tradition of the church and the history of theological thinking properly understood; the application of reason, of the principles of logical coherence, of 'reasonability'; and the contribution of experience, of that which has been demonstrated ... observed or experientially discovered in the concrete realities of life.¹²

In a spirit of seeking to promote the hallmarks of catholicity and grace, the quadrilateral methodology could be applied as follows to the issue of homosexuality and ministry.

The role of Scripture

Although without doubt references to homosexual acts in the Bible are overwhelmingly negative, it is an oversimplification to conclude that there is a blanket condemnation of the homosexual *person* as such. Rather, in general terms, references in Scripture need to be read and understood in the context of the laws and mores that applied to localised hospitality customs, and the religious requirement for justice in all areas of human life and interaction. In the New Testament, most references were penned by St Paul, for whom homosexual acts were simply cited in the context of discussing perverse behaviours and disruptive relationships. The general point is that the references are to unjust, disruptive, negative behaviours as such. The biblical writers do not refer to consensual, let alone personally affirming or loving, homosexual orientation and behaviour: such an understanding was unknown to them.

10. See, for example, Donald AD Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason & Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1990.

11. What here follows draws on the work of my previously published paper, 'Methodist Conference and Advent Hope: the Inclusive Christ'. *The Methodist Theological Review* New Series: No 1, December 1998, 35-40

12. *Ibid*

Furthermore, the behaviours cited may in fact be carried out by otherwise heterosexual people, and indeed often were, which underlay their being deemed perverse or unnatural.¹³ Scripture requires careful exegesis. References to homosexuality need to be placed alongside other references to human interpersonal behaviours that are also mentioned in the same texts. Also, when considering any specific issue, other dimensions of biblical revelation need to be brought to bear. It is a biblical-theological perspective that is always to be sought, not a naïve proof-text approach that distorts the living Word of God.

The Place of Tradition

Here the role of the history of Christian teaching needs to be acknowledged as well as countered, for it is a history which has largely echoed cultural homophobia and assumed, not just a literal, but also a comprehensive, biblically negative reference to homosexuality. As with scripture, so tradition needs to be carefully read and assessed, and other dimensions considered. For example, St Augustine, in response to another issue, determined that in respect of the priestly or presbyteral role validity resides in the office itself, not the person who holds the office. The reformer, Martin Luther, likewise contributed a trenchant observation: *simul justus et peccator* – we are at the same time both saved and yet sinners still; we none of us are perfect. And Wesley himself contributes yet another perspective: salvation as process – his ideas on sanctification and perfection. These and other dimensions of the wider Christian tradition must be brought to bear when considering, let alone making an institutional determination about, a sensitive theological and pastoral matter in the life of the church.

The Role of Reason

Wesley was always concerned to apply proper reasoning processes to the reading of Scripture as also to the review of Tradition as well as to the contemporary matter at hand: things need to be understood in context, or else we are prey to misunderstanding and error of interpretation. It is the application of this principle which is critical for all challenging issues. Reason allows us to see there are other dimensions of scripture and tradition which need to be placed alongside perspectives on homosexuality. Most notably we can cite grace and inclusiveness. The universality of God's love, acceptance, and forgiveness, for example, transcends all human particularities and signals a transcending inclusiveness to Christ's redemption. All have fallen short; all are acceptable to God. Each has their place, and only God knows and comprehends the fuller picture in which our individual lives are set.

The Place of Experience

The final plank of Wesley's methodology is to take into account the reality of experience, including the impact of new knowledge, new discoveries about life; factors which were unknown to the biblical writers but which, known to us, must be taken account of. This does not just refer to subjective perceptions, but to the objective and scientific dimension, the realm of empirical evidence, the contemporary experiential input.

Experiential investigation has revealed a whole new world of understanding of human sexuality; a whole new set of contexts for thinking and talking about homosexuality, which is not just a term referring to certain behaviours.¹⁴ That is, it is not just simply a behavioural

13. See for further material Peter Coleman, *Christian Attitudes to Homosexuality*. London: SPCK, 1980, 24-110.

14. As previously noted, Wesley did not use the word "homosexual" and gives no indication of considering homosexuality to be the complex phenomenon that it is generally the case today. What he would have said, as a man of our day and knowledge, can only be speculated. But it would certainly have been in keeping with the best of contemporary biblical as well as sociological and psychological knowledge – and this is what he would have expected of an educated clergy and church membership.

option, although it can certainly be that for some. There are others, I suggest, who are ‘politically’ gay, who have chosen gayness or homosexuality as their sexual identity to make a personal political statement. There may well also be those for whom it is the case that homosexuality amounts to a set of learned behaviours capable of modification. However, there is undoubtedly also the fact of genuinely genetic homosexuality: people born with a particular genetic makeup. In this regard it is theologically illicit to declare homosexuality *per se* as sinful. Rather it requires to be interpreted as a dimension of the created order, a variant condition of God-created human being. As we all know, there are many subtle variants to our genetic makeup as human beings. Morality is a matter of how we live out who we are, but who we are is given in our very createdness.

IV.

In applying the Wesleyan Quadrilateral we can see that biblical references to homosexuality are not the only scriptural data to be taken into account. Such passages that do refer to homosexuality cannot be simply read as normative directives for the contemporary discussion of this issue. Certainly the Bible has pride of place in terms of theological resources, as much today as it did for Wesley’s day. But a theological perspective on the issue of homosexuality – indeed any issue, I suggest – begins not with a selection of texts but with the nature of God, to whom the Bible bears witness. For the Bible is the record that reveals a God who seeks justice, who manifests caring concern for right relationships within a multiplicity of contexts and situations that apply to God’s creation. The application of the biblical dimension of the quadrilateral theological methodology, while it needs to address specific texts, must never be limited simply to texts which narrowly refer to homosexuality. It needs to take serious account of the underlying relationship that God endeavours to elicit from within the daily lives of all human beings.

So, too, with respect to the dimension of church tradition. It is not simply a matter of listing, let alone deferring to, the dominant received tradition of authoritative teachings and pronouncements. Rather, both the Bible and tradition can be said, in general, to advocate qualities of all human interaction and relationship that include acceptance, respect, mutuality of care and concern, the ability and willingness to forgive and be forgiven, sensitivity to the other, the capacity to love and be loved, and the sense of self-worth on the one hand, and the esteem of the partner on the other, as valid, even necessary, elements. Such motifs and dynamics of relationship are also endorsed under the rubric of the ‘experiential’ element, the fourth dimension of the quadrilateral. More, of course, could be said in relation to these, but my present focus will be on the third dimension, that of reason, or the application of rational critical thought that, nonetheless, reflects contemporary developments in understanding that could be viewed as exemplifying the experiential – or ‘empirical’ – dimension.

When we stop to think critically about sexuality in general terms, we might come up with something like the following which, arguably, is consonant with all that can be said in terms of the other elements of the quadrilateral. Genital sexual activity within the context of heterosexual relationship has a two-fold purpose. On the one hand, to be the means of procreation; on the other, to be the means of physical, intimate expression of those qualities – sensitivity, caringness, lovingness, etc – that can be adumbrated out of an analysis of Bible and tradition. The relational reality of being to which we are called, and for which we are created, is not some sanitised Platonic ideal, but a grounded, engaged, mutual encounter encompassing both flesh and spirit.

We can therefore recognise that the creation of human persons as sexual beings is not, in terms of heterosexual modality, something which is limited to the procreative function

alone. Extra-procreative sexual activity is a normal, divinely-created, agency of the expression of love, care, support, concern, esteem, acceptance, and so on, and includes the giving and receiving of pleasure and enjoyment which is also generally good for health and well-being. It follows that, even if the procreative function has a position of biological primacy within the heterosexual modality of human inter-relating, it is certainly by no means the norm by which to judge all aspects of heterosexual relating.

Extra-procreative sexual relating may be understood as a valid and appropriate means of experiencing and expressing relational qualities and values inherent in the Christian view of the nature of the human and the divine, as well as being the means of fulfilling normal physical, psychological and emotional needs. Non-procreative sexual relating may be viewed as a theologically legitimate activity. However, it is only procreative activity – that limited but necessary biological function: necessary, that is, for the human community, not necessarily for each individual human being – which by definition must be heterosexual.

Homosexuality can be viewed as a modality of the non-procreative expression of human sexuality. It can be the means of giving concrete expression to the same range of relational values that attend the heterosexual relationship, values which are affirmed theologically. Thus, theologically, homosexuality may be viewed as equally legitimate as heterosexuality as a mode of expressing and experiencing what is seen to be the heart of a mutually loving human relationship. The church ought to uphold the integrity of such relationship, and not by reactionary prejudice deny it. The expression and experience of loving intimacy should not be judged by any negative affective appreciation of but one item of behaviour – sodomy – which, of course, is by no means a uniquely homosexual practice in any case. It is the misuse of relationships and the allied abuse of individuals, whether in homo- or heterosexual modality, which constitutes the real malady, or sin, against which the proper condemnation of theological judgement is arraigned.

Conclusion

The theological perspective that may yet enable a positive option in respect to the contemporary problem of whether or not homosexual clergy ought to be allowed for within the church is one which is grounded in a contemporary, informed, understanding of the nature of human sexuality *per se*, and of homosexuality as something far more subtle, profound, and complex than either the biblical writers or the received teachings of the church ever envisaged.

The church proceeds with theological integrity when opening itself to new areas of human experience and spiritual insight to the extent it weighs carefully a theological rationale for so doing. Otherwise its life and outcomes are at the whim of current fad and predominant pressure tactics. The Methodist church in New Zealand did not so proceed in respect to the admission of homosexual persons into ministry and is paying a heavy price in consequence. Theologically, the Methodists effected an ecclesial determination without doctrinal underpinning and, in so doing, gave away much of their own theological and spiritual heritage.

However, the fact also remains that Methodism is heir to a theological legacy which, if my sketch as to its possible application has any validity, could yet restore a measure of theological integrity to the Methodist action. Further, it is a methodological approach that could be developed for the benefit of other churches likewise faced with resolving, or precluding, an ecclesial dilemma and theological crisis of their own.