
HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE CHURCH: EXAMINING THE MORAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE STAND OF THE CHURCH OF NIGERIA (ANGLICAN COMMUNION) AGAINST HOMOSEXUALITY

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Abstract

The Church of Nigeria Anglican communion maintains a strong opposition to homosexuality with members of the church who are found to be homosexuals facing dismissal and ostracism. This work employed a qualitative research design reviewing relevant literature to examine the moral implications of the stand of the church on homosexuality as it affects the church and its members. The position of the church on homosexuality could lead homosexual members of the church to develop psychological problems that could lead to suicide, they could also be secretive about the way they feel thereby leading to many secret homosexuals within the Church and they could resent the church and religion in general. The Church is right in its condemnation of homosexuality but must rethink its stand on homosexuality. The overwhelming grace of God in Christ Jesus demands that the church views the homosexual as a sinner like other sinners who need help to turn away from their sins. The need to maintain a balance is therefore recommended.

Keywords: Homosexuality, Church, Nigeria, Ethical, Anglican Communion

Introduction

The Church of Nigeria is part of the worldwide church in communion with the Church of England. It is the second-largest Province in the Anglican Communion after the Church of England. It gives its current membership as "over 18 million", (WCC 2016) out of a total Nigerian population of over 190 million. With a good number of these memberships as regular worshippers at Sunday services. (Glendhill, 2016)

The Anglican Communion has been under attack in recent times for its perceived tolerance of homosexuality and homosexual practices among its clergy, this is although the church's stand on the matter is clear as contained in its 1998 Lambeth conference resolution:

“Regarding "human sexuality", the conference said that it upholds "faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union, and believes that abstinence is right for those who are not called to marriage". Furthermore, it refused to "advise the legitimizing or blessing of same-sex unions nor ordaining those involved in same-gender unions” (Lambeth conference 1998)

This resolution like all other Lambeth conference resolutions is not legally binding on all provinces within the communion. Some national churches and provinces such as the church in Brazil, Canada, New Zealand, Scotland, South India, South Africa, the United States, and Wales have taken stands on homosexuality that contravenes the resolution of the larger church. (Welby, 2016) These provinces however have come under

attack by many groups, further bringing about divisions within the church, with those who hold to the traditional/ orthodox biblical views on sexuality as remaining the only permissible and accepted forms of sexuality approved by God for his people breaking communion with the parts of the communion which accept a liberal approach to sexuality. The break within the church saw the formation of the Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON) movement, as an alternative to the Lambeth Conference. GAFCON is basically a gathering of churches previously in communion with the church of England which share common views on the issues of sexuality and other issues related to doctrines. GAFCON's mission is to guard the unchanging, transforming Gospel of Jesus Christ and to proclaim Him to the world.

The Church of Nigeria which is at the forefront of the GAFCON movement maintains a strict rule against homosexuality and is one of the churches that have broken communion with other churches within the wider communion that maintain a liberal approach to homosexual practices and other doctrinal issues within the Church. However, despite the tough stand held against homosexuality by the Church, the practice is still observed to prevail within the Church. Reports of the dismissal of clergy who are found to be homosexual have surfaced in recent times. An obvious gap in the literature is the examination of the ethical implication of this stand as it affects the Church and its members. This work, therefore, uses a qualitative research design reviewing data obtained from articles, journals, and books to ethically analyze the effects of the stand of the church on homosexuality. Content analysis was used for the

analyses of the data and consequentialist theory of ethics was used to analyze the ethical implications.

What is Homosexuality?

Homosexuality is a term used to refer to same-sex eroticism. The term was coined by Karoly Maria Benkert in 1869. This term prevailed over other proposed terms such as sodomy, contrary sexual feelings, inversion, and Uranism (Hubert, 1997). There is no general agreement about the causes of homosexuality. Two theories exist. The first is that homosexuality is caused by genetic or biological factors, meaning that homosexuals are born that way. The second theory holds that homosexuality is caused by psychological and environmental influences and early experiences. This suggests that though homosexuals are not born that way, psychological and environmental factors make them so. The first theory seems to be receiving wider acceptance nowadays. Brown (1963) argues in support of the latter by noting that it would seem that the family pattern involving a combination of a dominating, cleverly intimate mother plus a detached or weak father is beyond doubt related to the development of male homosexuality.

Byne and Parsons (1993) proposed an “interactional model” in which genes or hormones do not specify sexual orientation per se, but instead bias particular personality trait and thereby influence how an individual and his or her environment interacts as sexual orientation and other personality characteristics unfold developmentally. Such a mechanism would allow for multiple developmental pathways leading to homosexuality and would account for the high concordance rate of homosexuality among identical twins reared together as well as for the failure of

various psychological theories that have focused exclusively either on personality traits or individual or various environmental factors but not on the interaction of the two.

A history of homosexual abuse was linked both to an adult homosexual orientation and sexual attraction to children among men (James and Anderson, 1997). Cultural factors, urbanization, and higher levels of education are directly correlated with higher levels of homosexual behaviors (Robert et al 1989). For the most part, people do not choose what sexual feeling or attraction they experience. Each of us does however choose the sexual behavior in which we engage. We are all bisexual to some degree. Kinsey's early research repeatedly has been confirmed. On the scale of sexual orientation, relatively few persons fall near the zero ends. (exclusively heterosexual) and relatively few approach the six mark (exclusively homosexual) this means that more adults whose general expression is heterosexual would experience homosexual feelings even though it is relegated to the subconscious level. Going by Freud's "reaction formula" defending against an impulse felt in adults by attacking it in others is a reaction against homosexuality that might be linked to secret fears of homosexual feelings ourselves.

The Church of Nigeria and Homosexuality

The central biblical message regarding sexuality is clear enough. The faithful's sexual expression always honors the personhood of the companion. Sexuality is not intended by God as a mysterious and alien force of nature, but as a power to be integrated into one's personhood and used responsibly in the service of love. Historically, homosexual behaviors have received strong persecution. Stoning, sexual mutilation, and the death penalty

were fairly common treatments for discovered homosexuals throughout centuries of the west's history. While the church frequently gave its blessing to civil persecution, in its internal ecclesiastical practice, its disapproval was even more frequently shown through the refusal of sacrament and ostracism from the common life. The secular world brought persecution for homosexuals while the Church affirmed it through its refusal of sacrament and ostracism from common life. The Nigerian case is no different. Article 214 of the Nigerian penal code states that the act of sodomy (homosexuality) between males is illegal and the penalty is imprisonment for 14 years. Attempting to commit the offense of sodomy is also illegal and the punishment for this offense is imprisonment for seven years. No organizations exist to support homosexuals in Nigeria. Any person known as a homosexual may face serious problems. Societies do not tolerate homosexuals and no homosexual dares say that he is homosexual. They largely tend to live 'underground' in Nigeria. The Nigerian church as part of the larger society gives its blessing to both the legislation against homosexuals and the punishment of homosexuals in the nation.

The Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) has remained sharply opposed to homosexuality, calling it "a perversion of human dignity". (Akinola 2007) In 2005, Archbishop Peter Akinola spoke out against the Church of England's decision to allow priests to enter into same-sex civil partnerships. The Church of Nigeria as a way of showing its strong disapproval of homosexuality and its perceived support by the church of England, amended its constitution to remove reference to Canterbury as the 'mother' church of the Anglican Communion, and replaced that reference with a statement of

being in communion with Anglican churches professing "historic faith." In March 2009, the Church declared itself in full communion with the Anglican Church in North America, a denomination formed by American and Canadian Anglicans who opposed their national churches' actions about homosexuality and equality. The Church of Nigeria has continuously opposed the liberal inclinations of the Episcopal Church of the United States and the Anglican Church of Canada, which led to the acceptance of non-celibate homosexuality and non-celibate homosexual clergy. The former primate, Peter Akinola, became prominent as a leader of conservatives within the Anglican Communion. After the ordination of a partnered gay man, Gene Robinson, as a bishop of the Diocese of New Hampshire, in the United States, he threatened that it was a measure that could split the Anglican Communion. As a first step, the church declared itself in "impaired communion" with the Episcopal Church USA on 21 November 2003. In September 2005 the Church of Nigeria reworded its constitution to redefine, from its point of view, the Anglican Communion, no longer as "Provinces in communion with the See of Canterbury" but instead "all Anglican Churches, Dioceses, and Provinces that hold and maintain the 'Historic Faith, Doctrine, Sacrament, and Discipline of the one Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.'" Also in 2005, Archbishop Akinola criticised the Church of England for allowing clergy in same-sex civil partnerships saying that "[it] proposes same-sex marriage 'in everything but the name' and that the proposal to extract a promise from gay clergy who register for civil unions to abstain from sexual relations is 'unworkable' and 'invites deception and ridicule'."

On November 12, 2005, the church entered into a "Covenant of Concordat" with the Reformed Episcopal Church and the Anglican Province of America, two conservative groups of Anglican origin but outside the Anglican Communion, which do not recognize the Episcopal Church USA. In October and December 2006, several Episcopal churches in Virginia declared themselves out of communion with the Episcopal Church USA due to their opposition to their stance on homosexuality and joined the Church of Nigeria through the Convocation of Anglicans in North America, a mission originally started by the Church of Nigeria to support Nigerian Anglicans in the United States. It now mostly consists of non-Nigerian, theologically conservative American Anglicans, and initially began under the oversight of two bishops; Bishop Martyn Minns and a suffragan bishop, David Bena, who are simultaneously bishops of the Church of Nigeria. The Church of Nigeria is currently in full communion with the Anglican Church in North America, founded in June 2009, of which the CANA is an affiliate jurisdiction, launched as a conservative alternative to the liberal tendencies of the Episcopal Church of the United States and the Anglican Church of Canada. The first of four new American dioceses for the ACNA established by the Church of Nigeria, under the oversight of the missionary bishop of CANA, was the Missionary Diocese of the Trinity which was inaugurated on 19 August 2012 by Archbishop Nicholas Okoh. the Convocation of Anglicans in North America is currently led by The Rt. Rev. Julian Dobbs who serves as Missionary Bishop of the Convocation as well as Diocesan bishop of CANA East. Bishop Felix Orji serves as bishop of CANA West who all share the same views on homosexuality as the church of Nigeria. The present primate of

the church of Nigeria archbishop Henry Ndukuba affirms the rejection of homosexuality by the church in his statement “the church of Nigeria affirms its total rejection of homosexuality. And will surely stand to defend the truth of the gospel base on the injunctions and ethical principles of the Holy Bible” (Vanguard 28 Feb. 2021)

In addition to the above, the Church has further demonstrated its seriousness in its fight against homosexuality by including in its ordination vows an oath to be taken by those to be ordained that they are not homosexuals or bisexuals. By this oath, those to be ordained are required to publicly declare that their sexual orientation was not towards homosexuality and bisexuality. By this oath any clergy who is found to be homosexual or bisexual risks having his ordination license withdrawn and being dismissed from the ordained ministry. This oath is taken by all functionaries of the church, not just the clergy. This shows that the church expects its entire clergy, church functionaries, and indeed all its members to stand with it in its stand against homosexuality.

There is no doubt that the church of Nigeria maintains a serious stand against homosexuality. Its willingness to and eventual severance of ties and communion with parts of the Anglican church that supports homosexuality in any way is a strong indication of its zero tolerance for homosexuality and homosexual behaviors. The inclusion of the oath wherein those to be ordained and other church functionaries were expected to declare under oath that they were not homosexuals or bisexuals is another strong indication that the church does not in any way condone or intend to condone any act of homosexuality among its members. An examination of the impact of this stand and its

ethical implication as it affects the church and the homosexual member of the church is necessary.

Impact of the stands of the Church on Homosexuality

The Church of Nigeria has maintained its stand against homosexuality and this has been made clear to both clergy and lay members of the church. A number of clergy who have been found to be involved in homosexual activities have received the strictest of sanctions for a clergy which is the withdrawal of the ordination license. By this they lose the right to practice as clergy within the church. They are dismissed without the option of being reabsorbed into the fold. This means that for many of them who are into fulltime pastoral ministry they would have to seek new means of making a living.

By severing ties with churches and provinces within the Anglican Communion which have a liberal stand on homosexuality, the church denies itself and its members the benefits that could have been derived from fellowshiping with these churches and provinces. The church has not attended the Lambeth Conference which unites all churches within the communion. This, therefore, means that the Church now fails to have fellowship with other churches within the communion both those with a liberal stand against homosexuality and those who like it hold a strict stand against the practice. Furthermore, the church loses the opportunity of making contributions to the overall growth of the communion.

Ethical implication of the stands of the church on homosexuality

The stands of the church against homosexuality are not without consequences. Discussions in this section shall be more on the effects of the stand of the church on the individual members that make –up the Church. Karl Barths view homosexuality as idolatry, unnatural, and violates the command of the creator. He however adds that the central theme of the gospel is God’s overwhelming grace in Jesus Christ, hence homosexuality must be condemned but the homosexual person must not. There is no doubt that homosexuality is evil and must not be tolerated and by this, the church is right to take a strong stand against it. The inclusion of the oath declaring that one was not a homosexual or bisexual in the oaths for ordination and the severance of ties and communion with churches that accept homosexual activities indeed are steps in the right direction.

However, the church fails to consider the fact that many homosexuals cannot help themselves. Homosexual tendencies as having been shown above could be caused by genetic or psychological factors as such persons with homosexual tendencies are faced with desires that may be too strong for them to resist. Many would require help to fight their desires and change their sexual orientation. Outright ostracism of homosexual members and dismissal of homosexual clergy, by the church, does very little to help the homosexual. The church seems rather to be more concerned about protecting its image than helping a sick member to recover. The church seems to be saying to the homosexual ‘we don’t mind you being homosexuals but just take it outside our church’. The Church that is rather concerned with protecting its image rather than helping its members can be viewed as

hypocritical. The church has not been known to send sinners away but rather works to help them repent of their sins and live righteously. The fundamental goal of the church is to raise believers that will live their lives for God and eventually make heaven when they die. The evangelical and missionary nature of the church demands that it continues to seek the lost with the view to restoring them to faith. Sending the homosexual ‘sinner’ away from the Church raises doubts about the Church’s sincerity in its mission and evangelistic claims.

Furthermore, this very strong stand of the church against homosexuality would deter its members with homosexual tendencies from being open about the way they feel. This would mean that the church would have many members with homosexual tendencies or even secrete homosexuals within its congregation. By this, the church would be losing the battle it is fighting even from within. A more open approach to homosexuality would encourage persons with homosexual desires to open up about their desires and find help. Developing a ministry that helps people control their homosexual tendencies and helps them build healthy sexuality as is required by the church is no doubt a much better approach to dealing with homosexuality than ostracism and dismissal of gay persons.

The possibility of witch-hunting could also exist among ministers of the church with persons throwing accusations and counter-accusations about persons who are homosexuals. The church would have created an avenue for suspicion among its members. The very strict stand of the church against the homosexual priest by dismissing gay priests from the ministry of the church could make clergy who have scores to settle with other clergies accuse them of homosexuality with the hope that they

will eventually be sent out of the church. Same-sex members of the church enjoying close and intimate fellowship could be accused of being homosexual. The fear of such accusation would deny them the benefits derivable from such fellowships.

Many of the members of the church with the unresolved conflict between their religious beliefs and sexuality are most likely to leave their religious affiliation due to the conflict with many of them generally ending up without any form of religious affiliation. Leaving one's religion of origin may add additional stressors that ultimately place a person at additional risk of suicide. When individuals experience conflict with an acceptable belief structure this can cause a great deal of distress, which may lead to a desire to escape (Gibbs, 2016). Aggression towards homosexual persons who have strong ties to their religious faith or strong cultural and familial roots in religion, as is true for many Africans contributes to lowered self-esteem, negative feelings about one's sexual identity, stress, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder for some individuals. (Burn, Kadlec, and Rexer, 2015, Nadal et al., 2011; Platt and Lenzen, 2013; Wright and Wegner, 2012).

Microaggressions and subsequently internalized heterosexism, are more likely to have significant social and mental health effects when coming from close friends, family, and other highly esteemed individuals (Balsam, Molina, Beadnell, Simoni, and Walter 2011). The ostracism and dismissal of homosexual members of the church do not only tend to make them unbelievers, but it could also lead them to suicide. These effects challenge the teaching and belief of the church on the overwhelming nature of the grace of God as found in Christ. The grace speaks of God not being happy with the death of a sinner

but rather that the sinner would repent and be saved. The approach adopted by the church of sending away homosexuals from its midst portrays the church as being selfish and unconcerned about the plight of the suffering sinners in their midst or being selective in their relationship with sinners considering the homosexuals as the greatest of sinners that do not deserve pardon.

The belief held by the Church about homosexuality being unnatural, perverted, and 'a sin', leads a significant proportion of the gay and lesbian community also to harbor strong anti-religious sentiments that exhibit themselves in a healthy disdain for anything and anyone having to do with an organized Christian religious view as being homophobic, heterosexist and patriarchal. (Eric 2009). The possibility of raising an anti-Anglican gay group within the church in Nigeria is imminent. Having such groups would be a distraction for the Church and is something that should be avoided. A more pragmatic approach towards homosexuals could prevent this.

The strong stigma that the church attaches to homosexuality could directly influence HIV risk behaviors and interfere with the effectiveness of HIV prevention activities. (Quinn, Dickson-Gomez, and Young 2016). Given the high prevalence of HIV in the country and the efforts being made at all levels to combat the spread of the disease, the church would not like to be seen as engaging in counter-productive acts. The Church as a major influencer in society is at the forefront of the fight against HIV, its stigmatization of homosexual persons negatively affects its efforts at fighting HIV. The church would need to weigh carefully the impact of its stigmatization of homosexuals on its holistic ministry.

Conclusion

Barths is right about the overwhelming grace of God in Christ Jesus and the need to view the homosexual person in the light of this grace. Homosexuality is wrong and must be discouraged in very strong terms but homosexuals as one under the overwhelming grace of God must not be condemned. The homosexual is a sinner like any other sinner and the church towards all sinners must help them out of their sin with the view of helping them make heaven. The Nigerian church no doubt would continue to be faced with the challenges of homosexuality. There would continually be persons within the church with homosexual feelings. Sending them out of the church does not seem to be the solution to the problem rather it opens the door to many other problems. The church while still rejecting strongly homosexuality needs to have a more open approach to homosexuals. The church must continue to reject homosexuality but must consider the homosexual a sinner that needs to be shown the love of God as revealed in the grace that Christ offers. A ministry targeted at providing help to the homosexual in form of counseling for the homosexual within the church is necessary at this point. The church has failed homosexual member in this regard. Understandably, the stand of the church against homosexuality is aimed at discouraging the practice among its members but a balance is necessary.

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