

ADDENDUM

Alison Campbell—*Honorary Secretary*

Alison Campbell served as the Honorary Secretary of the Committee from 1991 to 1993. Her desire for good administration, her understanding of many aspects of the issues with which the Committee has to deal, her strong commitment to God's justice and peace, and her hard work, have all enriched the Committee's life. She has earned the gratitude not only of those who have worked with her, but also of the whole Church.

ANDREW R. C. McLELLAN, *Convener*.

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PANEL ON DOCTRINE

MAY 1994

PROPOSED DELIVERANCE

The General Assembly:

1. Receive the Report and thank the Panel, especially the office-bearers.
2. Reaffirm marriage, with its privileges and responsibilities, as one of God's great gifts to humanity for the wellbeing of husband and wife, the security of growing children and the social health of the community.
3. Reaffirm marriage as an institution in which the love of God exemplified in Christ is earthed in human relationship, requiring from couples all the love, trust, forgiveness and faithfulness of which by grace they are capable.
4. Reaffirm stable family life as the most desirable setting for the upbringing of children, but caution against superficial and unspecified "family values" which can be used as a slogan to hurt or alienate those who are not part of a nuclear family.
5. Recognise that Christians in good faith hold diverse interpretations of God's will in the area of sexual ethics.
6. Encourage congregations to explore ways of providing effective marriage preparation and of supporting couples whose relationship is under strain.
7. Deplore the pressures to which the young and the vulnerable are subjected by the trivialisation and commercialisation of sex, and challenge the widely held assumption that sexual experience is a necessary manifestation of adulthood.
8. Recognise celibacy as a valid Christian life-choice.
9. Affirm love, trust, forgiveness and faithfulness as the most significant criteria by which all relationships are to be assessed; and urge congregations not to discriminate against any person on grounds of marital status or sexual orientation.
10. Instruct the Panel, in consultation with the Board of Parish Education and the Board of Social Responsibility, to prepare guidelines for congregational study of the issues raised in the report.
11. Note that a fuller report from the Working Party considering the feasibility of a theological examination of anti-semitism can be expected in 1995.
12. Note the progress made by the Joint Commission on Doctrine towards a shared report on Marriage.

REPORT

ON THE THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE

MEMBERSHIP OF THE WORKING PARTY:

Mrs Elizabeth Templeton, *Convener*
 The Rev Dr Stewart Todd
 The Rev Professor David Ferguson
 The Rev Gordon Grant
 The Rev Dr Ian Hazlett
 The Rev Dr William Peat

Professor William Gordon
Dr Bruce McCormack (for one year)
Mrs Jean Morrison (co-opted)
The Rev David Beckett, Secretary.

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1. BACKGROUND

The remit to the Panel:

1.1 The Panel was instructed by the General Assembly of 1990 "to undertake a review of the Church of Scotland's theology of marriage in consultation with the Board of Social Responsibility and the Board of Education, taking into account the increasing number of pastoral problems raised by broken marriages and changing social patterns." This arose from a Report presented through the Joint Commission on Doctrine on the Roman Catholic theology and practice of marriage.

1.2 A further remit was approved by the 1991 General Assembly, to the effect that the Assembly "request all Boards, Committees and Panels to assist the Working Party on the Theology of Marriage and urge them to submit papers on Marriage and Family Life which fall within their remit so that the study can be full and comprehensive and grounded both upon the Scriptures and the life which church members lead now."

The Report to last year's General Assembly:

no 1.3 The 1993 Report, of which the points below represent a very sketchy summary, was accepted without discussion by the General Assembly, which also approved without division a Deliverance that "The General Assembly affirm the institution of marriage as a gift of God to his human creatures, the normative context of the deepest and most joyful relationship between man and woman, enhanced for Christian partners by their shared faith and their perception of God as source of all love." This has remained the fundamental conviction of the Panel's Working Party, and the premise behind all our thinking as we have sought to tackle the more problematic parts of our remit: "the increasing number of pastoral problems raised by broken marriages and changing social patterns", and the relationship between "the Scriptures and the life which Church members lead now".

1.4 The immediate task of the Panel was to enable the Assembly to respond to the 1990 document from the Joint Commission on Doctrine outlining the Roman Catholic theology and practice of marriage. To this end, our response to specific points in the Roman Catholic submission¹ was prefaced by two papers: one by Dr Ian Hazlett entitled *Marriage and*

*Heterosexuality in History and Christian Tradition: Some Stipos*², the other by Professor David Fergusson entitled *A Reformed Theology of Marriage*³. The following points made in those two papers have helped to shape the thinking of the Working Party during this year's deliberations and it may be helpful to commissioners without ready access to last year's Blue Book to reiterate them here:

- (i) Marriage as an institution is found in all known human cultures, an intrinsic part of the natural order and natural law. In Judaeo-Christian tradition it has always been invested with religious significance, but nowhere in the Bible or the very early Church is there any evidence of a religious marriage ceremony as such. Marriage was contractual, an agreement between families, rather than a matter of personal choice, and it reflected a strongly patriarchal society in which the begetting of heirs and the preservation of property were important motivating forces.
- (ii) At points in the Old Testament (e.g. Hosea, Malachi) and also in the New (Paul) marriage is perceived as a covenant relationship similar to that between God and his people: a concept many people now find problematic because the relationship between God and Israel or Christ and the Church is hierarchical and in no sense a partnership of equals.
- (iii) Christ says very little about marriage. The Epistles show some apparent inconsistencies. At times marriage appears to be a regrettable concession to human weakness, inferior to celibacy (1 Corinthians 7) at others (Ephesians 5) it is the closest human parallel to the relationship between Christ and Church. The former was no complete unanimity of doctrine. Virginity, celibacy, abstinence came to be seen as signs of superior Christian dedication; marriage was an option only for "secular" Christians. Even within marriage, sexual relations were somewhat grudgingly permitted and were justified in terms of procreation rather than pleasure or nurture of husband and wife. Eros and spirituality were seen as incompatible. In 1215 the Fourth Lateran Church Council did acknowledge that married people, and not just celibates, "merit to attain eternal happiness". In 1274 Marriage was designated one of the seven sacraments. The Church took over from the state the supervision of marriage vows; services were held increasingly often in church, occasionally with nuptial mass.
- (iv) The Reformers held marriage in high regard and rejected celibacy as a virtue. This tended to lower the status of the unmarried, especially women, since monastic life was no longer an option. "The strength of Reformation teaching... is its elevation of the religious, spiritual and social status of marital existence."⁴ Sexual activity within marriage was more affirmed than previously. The Reformers conceded divorce on various grounds, and Bucer in Strasbourg even argued, unsuccessfully, for divorce on grounds of incompatibility—no love, no marriage. The Westminster Confession restricted marriage to partners of the Reformed faith, but gave new priority to the mutual help and comfort of husband and wife, rather than the procreation of children.
- (v) The 18th century Enlightenment tended to focus more on the individuals in relationship to each other and detached the essence of marriage from social, family or religious obligations, emphasising self-realisation and personal wellbeing. The Romantic movement further emphasised the priority of love and partnership. The later 19th century brought reaction against this tendency, with a strong emphasis on duty, a patriarchal attitude to marriage and a repressive attitude to sex, especially female sexuality. This helped to engender much hypocrisy, and to encourage much prostitution.
- (vi) Marxism, Humanism and Freudian psychology all challenged conventional Victorian attitudes. Christian reaction to these new forces still shows some

¹ Ibid., pp. 196-215.

² Ibid., pp. 216-223.

³ Ibid., p. 208.

concessions to their insights—e.g. Barth's rejection of compulsory marriage and tolerance of faithful monogamous cohabitation, though such a position is also found in some Church Fathers centuries before. Roman Catholic thinking from Vatican II (1964-65) emphasised partnership and love as primary elements in marriage, rather than child-procreation.

Throughout the history of the Church, there has been no single consistent or unified doctrine of marriage, apart from the affirmation of heterosexual monogamy as the God-given union of one man and one woman, and the exhortation to fidelity as well as pre-marital abstinence.

(vii) Karl Barth's is one of the most comprehensive Reformed treatments of marriage in the 20th century. He describes marriage as "a unique, unrepeatable and incomparable encounter and relationship between a particular man and a particular woman".⁵ Marriage is not purely a domestic matter; it has ecclesial, social and legal implications. It must be freely entered into by both partners, and must be regarded as a permanent, exclusive bond.

(viii) Barth's analysis has proved influential. It informs the recent description of marriage offered by the American Presbyterian theologian, Shirley Guthrie: "Christian marriage is a life partnership based on mutual human love in faithfulness to God, confirmed and witnessed to by a wedding service, and sustained by dependence on God's forgiving and enabling grace in Jesus Christ".⁶

(ix) At the same time criticisms of Barth have appeared even amongst his most sympathetic commentators. He fails to devote sufficient attention to the pastoral fact that many marriages break down even when they have been entered into with the best intentions, and he does not adequately recognise that God may work in and through the remedies of divorce and remarriage. Moreover, any concept of marriage as a covenantal relationship must differ from biblical covenantal relationships (God/Israel, Christ/Church) in that marriage is a mutual binding of two equal partners, not an offer extended by the greater partner to the lesser.

(x) Traditionally, marriage has given greater emphasis to the "mutual help of husband and wife". Sex within marriage can only occasionally be procreative, but at all times can be "an act of celebration, gratitude, affirmation, comfort or reconciliation".⁷ It implies an exclusive commitment which is validated only by the ideal of marriage, and abstinence from pre-marital sex "may be understood as fidelity in advance".⁸

(xi) The Church's teaching on pre-marital and extra-marital sex only makes sense within the context of its ideal of marriage. It is the failure to make this connection apparent which has opened up a wide gulf between the traditional teaching of the Church on sexual matters and the values of a large majority of young people. Moreover, the question arises whether the rules surrounding the institution of marriage are applicable to those for whom marriage is an impossibility; e.g. homosexuals.

(xii) The Church, lamenting the number of divorces and broken marriages, often creates the false impression that there was once a golden age of the family. "Perhaps the time has come not to look aglance at the statistics but to rejoice and marvel at the fact that so many marriages do endure."⁹

(xiii) Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of Scotland does not regard the celebration of marriage as an ecclesiastical sacrament. Faith undoubtedly informs and deepens our perception of marriage, since we believe that love is one of God's great gifts to us and that his forgiveness and grace in Jesus Christ may enrich and be shown forth in the marriage of believers. Yet there is no separate institution of Christian marriage, and the marriages of non-believers also lie within the providence of God and are blessed by him.

⁵ Karl Barth *Church Dogmatics III/4* (T & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1962) p. 182.

⁶ "Towards a Theology of Christian Marriage", *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. D. K. McKim (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1992), p. 326.

⁷ Assembly Reports 1993, p. 222.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

2. PREAMBLE

2.1 This year's Report emerges from the conviction—sometimes humanly painful but, we believe, God-given—that all the major churches of the Western world are in theological ferment about marriage, sexuality and cognate questions. We have recognised with appreciation the detailed biblical and patristic work presented in the 1957 Report of the Special Committee on Remarriage of Divorced Persons. We have not repeated that Committee's work, but have sought to set it in the context of a significantly changed social order, which demands theological understanding and evaluation.

2.2 We believe that this Report can be no more than a contribution to that unfinished exploration in which so many churches are engaged, since depth and intensity of conviction about faith, human nature, Scripture and the character of Christian morality mark widely diverse positions.

2.3 The Panel recognises that huge questions remain unsettled: and at the present time cannot be settled. How much of the traditional Church stance, if any, is culture-bound? How far is the modification of that stance driven only by the "spirit of the age", and how far by theologically-coloured insight? How is Scripture used and abused in ethical debate? Is society in terminal moral decline, are we on the brink of a new Golden Age, or are we in the birth-pangs of a responsible ethic for the twenty first century?

2.4 Our witness to the wider world, to the ecumenical community, and to those who actually live within the sphere of influence of the Church of Scotland, is the common concern of the Panel. What form that witness takes in this area is contentious, and conspicuously published.

2.5 We believe that it must be a matter for ongoing wrestling in and beyond the Church to reach a point where we understand one another, and find a way to be a reconciled community in this area. Our willingness to work towards that will be, we hope, sufficient justification for the refusal to make categorical statements which polarise camps within the Church. But that must be tested by our ongoing exploration, theological and experiential, in the coming years and at all levels of the Church's life.

3. QUESTIONS OF SCRIPTURAL INTERPRETATION

3.1 All of us within the Church of Scotland believe Scripture to be the supreme rule of faith and life; divisions arise over how we hear and understand and handle that supreme rule. We recognise from the immense growth of work in the field of scriptural interpretation that the Bible is invariably read from some ecclesiastical, historical or cultural perspective. Even the basic "*sola scriptura*" principle does not negate the fact that we all interpret history through lenses. Sometimes these are the lenses of a denomination's history and tradition and atmosphere. Sometimes they are the lenses of a cultural heritage of which we are, or may be, barely conscious (e.g. nineteenth century liberalism, male patriarchy, bourgeois individualism).

3.2 These perspectives often become evident only in dialogue with others who do not share them or find them self-evident: when one encounters, for instance, the liberation theologies of the two-thirds world, or the feminist reading of Scripture, or the Eastern Orthodox challenge to "West European individualism". Thus, if you give five exegeses the task of interpreting a given passage of St Paul, even if all are committed to obedience to Scripture, what they "find" there is liable to vary immensely, depending on whether they come at it as rich or poor, male or female, powerful or underdog, Eastern or Western Christian, Roman Catholic or Reformed etc.

3.3 It is an insight distinctive to the 20th century that our interpretation of Scripture is likely to be bound up with our cultural and linguistic presuppositions. Access to wide comparative data from a large number of disciplines, the cross-fertilisation of cultural exchange and interaction, the studies in history and social science which document the impact

of social conditioning, all raise general awareness of the way our ideas are embedded in a particular inherited social structure. At a theoretical level, the "sociology of knowledge" suggests that all human understandings of reality are likely to be relative to the specific cultural context in which people operate.

3:4 Within the churches, there is increasing recognition that all theology is bound to be "contextual"—not just in the sense of *addressing* a particular situation, but in the sense of *emerging from* particular patterns of speech, thought and understanding (often unconscious) and deeply embedded in structures of social, linguistic or cultural belonging. The idea that there can be an uncontested "universal theology", free from such cultural conditioning and filtering, seems to many implausible. For those who want to claim absolute certitude and authority in matters of doctrine or ethical perception, such recognition of cultural relativism seems threatening to the claim that God reveals himself. It may, however, be seen not as a loss of religious nerve, but as an affirmation of how partial, or even distorted, the human reception of God's self-disclosure is liable to be, in which case it is seen as proper humility in the face of the variety of ways that God's truth has been understood within different traditions and at different periods of history. "Where pluralism is denied, finitude is forgotten, and faith is corrupted into an idolatrous absolutising of one of its particular expressions."⁹

3:5 The most controversial aspect of this recognition is whether it applies also to the canon of Scripture, or whether that is safeguarded from such human limitations, and manifests *uniformly* the "partiality and perspective" of God. The Church of Scotland has members at various points on this spectrum of belief. We therefore believe that the most constructive policy for the Church is not to take a position which excludes many *bona fide* members, but to invite as inclusive a conversation as possible, while we grapple together with the implications of ongoing research in other areas.

3:6 Within this broad recognition of how culture may affect both how Scripture was written and how it is read, there is a specific issue about sexuality. Should scriptural guidelines about marriage, sexuality and homosexuality be read as absolute and timelessly true directives from God? Should they be seen as assumptions from one ancient culture, carried forward unquestioned into Jewish and early Christian faith? Should they be regarded as authoritative attempts to discern the will of God, which each generation of the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit has to wrestle with, absorb and make its own?

3:7 Again, we judge that the Church of Scotland has members whose beliefs and alignments span these positions. Rather than effectively excommunicating any one group by accepting the other(s) as absolute, we believe that it is part of the creative vocation of the Church in our time to wrestle with these issues in as inclusive a way as possible, bearing the pain and conflict involved in that engagement in the hope that such pain may be the birth-pangs of new awareness and insight promised by the farewell discourses of John's Gospel.¹⁰

3:8 Many scriptural passages not related to sexuality seem to regard as normal attitudes which are now widely unacceptable within the Christian community—e.g. militarism (Joshua, Esther), the dominance of men over women (passim), the right to vengeance, concubinage, surrogacy, slavery. The fact that we feel free, under God, to move on from such attitudes as culture-relative and not binding on us ethically means that *in principle* any alleged "biblical ethical" stance is open to scrutiny. The hard question is whether biblical attitudes to marriage belong to the category of the sociologically conditioned and revisable stances of their day, or to the absolute norms of God's disclosure of his will for the earth—or a bit of both! The division of judgement here is not between those who respect Scripture and those who don't, or those who take biblical authority seriously and those who don't, but between those who understand that authority in different ways.

3:9 Christians, in good faith, have many different ways of finding Scripture authoritative and edifying:

- (i) For some, Scripture is held to be inerrant in every detail, whether of doctrine or ethics or factual information. For more it may be questioned on details of chronology

⁹ Charles Davis, *Religion and the Making of Society*, Cambridge, 1993.

¹⁰ John 16:12.

or natural history, but not on ethical or doctrinal teaching. One member of the Panel who dissented from this Report defines his position thus: "Many Christians, in line with the Church's profession that the Word of God in Scripture is the supreme rule of faith and life, believe that, when correctly interpreted, its teaching is always true and authoritative. Scripture is God's own witness to himself in the form of human witness. Correct interpretation involves having regard to the different literary genres of the biblical books, their place in the ongoing story of divine revelation and salvation history, their original historical setting, and so on."

- (ii) For others, including the majority of the Working Party, the authority of Scripture is in its witness to the overwhelming core of God's generosity, culminating in the Incarnation and the renewal of all things. In the light of this central disclosure, other elements of Jewish or early Christian traditions may be found to be "sub-ethical", albeit countenanced or even prescribed within Scripture. The abolition of slavery and decisions to ordain women are instances where the implications of the core gospel have seemed to the Church to outweigh particular texts or biblically tolerated practices.

- (iii) On occasions, the entire perspective of a biblical book may be seen as manifesting an attitude at odds with the inclusive love of God—e.g. the exclusive nationalism of Esther. The presence of such books in Scripture may be seen as valuable, not because they show us *right* responses to the divine self-revelation, but because they are salutary instances of partial or limited ones which invite us to scrutinise our own responses.

- (iv) The insights of historical critical scholarship suggest that we often encounter elements of tradition which are expressions of divergent and sometimes apparently incompatible theologies (e.g. Luke's view of Jesus Christ as the adopted Son of God over against John's view of him as the incarnate Word of God). For some Christians the only response to such divergences has been to argue that they are somehow ultimately comparable. For others, however, the fact that Scripture shows us people wrestling with God's self-disclosure, and understanding it in widely differing ways, is itself a gift and not a problem. It frees the Christian community at later post-biblical times to explore the truth of God without undue terror or dismay at its own widely different readings of that truth. For example, Christians who expect spectacular supernatural signs of divine intervention and Christians who expect no unambiguous sign of God's presence both find antecedents in biblical sources. Major debates, like the circumcision issue in the early Church, may be received as liberating precedents for contemporary debates of similarly divided conviction.

3:10 It is clear from the debates which exercise so many Churches at present that all these questions arise with specific urgency in relation to the area of sexual ethics. The following points deserve careful attention, and may be of particular significance in relation to decision-making in this area:

- (i) The Bible pays remarkably little direct attention to matters of sexual ethics, compared to other topics. The Old Testament, for instance, has immensely more material on usury and on social justice than on explicit sexual ethics. The textual basis for the traditional ethic of "No sex before or outside heterosexual marriage" is, in effect, the creation narrative, together with Jesus' allusion to it in relation to divorce; also, the Levitical and Deuteronomic prohibitions of fornication and adultery, together with Paul's condemnation of the sins of Gentiles in Romans 1:18ff. 1 Corinthians 6:9, 10 and the reference in 1 Timothy 1:10. Curiously enough, the most extended celebration of loving sexuality in Scripture, the Song of Songs, is rarely taken as significant, though its mutuality and exuberance seem to set a very different tone from the scrutiny of others for acts of sexual misdemeanour.

By contrast, the Old Testament at different stages clearly accepts as normal a range of practices which today would be outlawed by traditional ethics (concubinage, polygamy and surrogacy, to mention three). The very passage in Genesis 19:

4-8 which is repeatedly used to veto homosexual sodomy contains the apparently unchallenged right of a father to offer his two virgin daughters as substitutes to the men of Sodom—or should we read this, as Von Rad suggests, as an example of oriental exaggeration in a critical situation? The Levitical condemnation of same sex intercourse¹¹ comes amidst a range of prohibitions, accounts of ritual uncleanness etc which are totally unattended to by the Christian Church.

This forces us to ask what allows the selective attentiveness to such verses which the tradition of church sexual ethics sometimes gives them.

- (ii) Even if these passages are taken as having trans-cultural force, and not being culture-bound, the question must be faced of whether such words as "fornication and 'adultery' actually mean the same in a context where women were legally and socially seen as the property of the responsible males—e.g. father, husband, brother. If the crime was seen as serious and seriously punishable, was this because it was a violation of the norms of social control and ownership, or because the actual sexual intercourse was seen as immoral? The fact that the Old Testament seems to make no protest about women who sleep with other men if this is at the disposition of the responsible male rather suggests the former. It at least raises the question of whether the connotation of the terms can be identical in the original context and in ours.

- (iii) Similarly, in relation to the Pauline material: while it is clear that all Paul's references to homosexual practice are negative, it is clear too that even his toleration of marriage is not particularly enthusiastic. His primary theological and missionary concern was to establish and consolidate the new community of those awaiting the anticipated return of the Risen Lord. To this concern, marriage was an irrelevance, and differentiation from the pagan community—with its associated cult-sexuality—was vital. As voluminous literature suggests,¹² the very concept of a same-sex faithful relationship in the context of love, or indeed the idea of sexual *orientation* is an anachronism for Paul: so that it is an open question whether his strictures could be taken to apply to such a situation at all.

- (iv) It is an example of knowledge not available to biblical writers that we increasingly understand same-sex orientation to be a given part of personality, fairly early established, for a significant number of people. Controversy about the objective number of those whose orientation is predominantly or exclusively homosexual is part of the complexity of the current debates. Arguments rage about whether data are loaded, interrogative procedures biased, conclusions going beyond the evidence, sources of information trustworthy.

The disputed range of figures runs from one or two per cent of the population at the most conservative estimate, to about ten per cent at the most generous one. Whatever the numerical range, if it is seen as a natural "given", either by genetic programming or by psychological disposition, theological perspectives may read the data in different ways. For some, the range of sexual orientations is to be seen as part of the natural diversity of God's creation, in itself no more sinister or negative than left-handedness or skin pigment. It then belongs to the God-given createdness which is ours to make the best of. This in turn leaves open the possibility that "making the best of it" means suppressing it in the case of homosexual or bisexual orientation: or that it means channelling it towards the same kind of loyal, loving, total body-mind-spirit relationship which the Church commends for those of heterosexual orientation.

- (v) On the other hand, the "givenness" of the orientation may itself be placed not in God's creative providence, but as an aspect of "the problem of evil", like gross physical or mental handicap. This sense of "grave disorder", as the most recent Vatican statement on the matter described it, carries with it the implication that no

enactment of the "disorder" can be countenanced and that, if therapy is impossible, abstinence is the only solution. As with most other aspects of this debate, violent controversy rages about the merits and demerits, success and failure, of attempts to "decondition" homosexuals (such as the "ex-gay" movement), about medical, psychological and biological diagnoses of causes, about the degree of ambivalence in sexual orientation, and about the impact of social responses.

- (vi) Scripture never raises the question of sexual orientation. It could hardly have done so, given that it was not a category available in the biblical world. As, in the 16th century, perceptions of how the sun moved had to be challenged by the new range of cosmological knowledge opened up by the work of Copernicus and Galileo, so it seems to some Christians now that the adverse biblical comments on homosexual acts need to be challenged as dated reactions now superseded by our new understanding of human sexual orientation. At the heart of the debate about Scripture and same-sex relationships is the question of whether God gives us new knowledge, and expects us to respond flexibly to that in the light of his over-riding criteria of good relationship.

4. THE STATUS AND CONTINUING IMPORTANCE OF MARRIAGE

4:1 Recognising the diversity of biblical interpretation and theological perspective outlined above, we believe and wish to re-affirm that marriage is a gift of God, one of the patterns of relationship offered by God for our human wellbeing because it is not good for us to be alone. There are some biological and social relationships which are part and parcel of every human being's existence—such as having particular parents, being born male or female, belonging to a specific social grouping. Marriage differs from these in being neither universal nor necessary. It is a relationship we ourselves choose. In some contexts it is virtually required by social pressures or cultural expectations, in others it is virtually ruled out by psychological problems or by social circumstances, as when wars decimate the male population or when children are nurtured in a way which destroys their confidence in stable, mutual relationship.

4:2 Although it is not part of everybody's life experience, the marriage relationship is of unique importance: partly because it is the deepest relationship in which the marriage partners are involved and therefore has tremendous potential either to nourish or to damage them, partly because other deeply important relationships stem from it through procreation—those between parents and children, and between siblings. In the love, sexuality, trust, faithfulness and mutual self-giving of marriage, a new person can be brought into being. To this person the parents are connected in a most intimate manner at various levels, and yet the measure of successful parenting is that we allow the child to grow and move away into his or her own freedom. We are challenged to love unconditionally someone whose life, thoughts and actions we cannot control (and would not wish to control) but who remains part of our deepest thoughts and feelings. This "connected-separateness" makes both parents and children very vulnerable: it is through the love, support and consolation given by our spouse and co-parent that we find the joy and the glory of real relationship. The bonding of a man and woman which we understand as marriage therefore has vital implications for the wellbeing, indeed the very fabric, of society. It is appropriately spoken of in the Preamble to the Marriage Service as "a gift and calling of God . . . not to be undertaken lightly or from selfish motives, but with reverence and dedication. . . . It is also rightly linked in that same service with 'the ordering of family life, where children—who are also God's gifts to us—may enjoy the security of love and the heritage of faith'".¹³ Although procreation is not the exclusive purpose of marriage, the upbringing of children is for many couples a task and responsibility of the utmost importance. The context of a committed relationship within a stable home provides a secure environment for the nurture of children, and the trauma often caused to children by marital breakdown is well documented. For Christians, the raising of children within the family also provides an opportunity for the imparting of the faith to the next generation.

¹¹ Leviticus 18:22, 20:13.

¹² See, for instance, Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Faber, 1990.

¹³ *Book of Common Order* 1979p. 73.

4:3 In contemporary Western society it is widely assumed that the decision to enter into marriage rests with the partners themselves. Historically, and in many other cultures still, that decision has tended to rest largely with parents or the extended family or the tribe. It is important not to read back into biblical cultures our Western notion of marriage as stemming from romantic love and mutual choice. Nevertheless, any convincing contemporary theological understanding of marriage is bound to emphasise its value and challenge not simply as a human obligation but as a mode of free communion between persons, one which reflects the harmonious communion of God's own life and his constancy in relationship to the whole creation.

4:4 It is this characteristic of faithfulness which opens up horizons of hope and promise within marriage, as an enduring lifelong relationship of sharing and trust, cherishing and nourishing. When two people go through thick and thin together, they are—to each other, to their families and to the outside world—a manifestation of constancy, of ongoing mutual commitment, of generous forgiveness and of creativity. All these qualities image the character of God. In the way that each partner's individuality is enhanced by the relationship rather than being submerged or blurred by it, we earth the Christian understanding of what it means to be a person in communion. Sexual intimacy, at its most fulfilling, is the physical enactment of that relationship, though it may be expressed in other ways through shared commitments, aesthetic appreciation, friendship etc.

4:5 It is this good life-enhancing news of human possibilities that Christians wish to affirm and commend. When Christians marry, their hope and their commitment are explicit. The human dimensions of their relationship are offered for deepening and consolidation to God's creative sustaining. This arises from, and also reinforces, the distinctive awareness of how Christ's New Covenant is reflected within the marriage union, and of how his solidarity with us invites us to solidarity with one another in the microcosmic relationship of husband and wife.

4:6 It is perhaps more helpful to describe the gift of marriage in terms of mystery rather than ecclesiastical sacrament. The Reformation Churches recognise only two sacraments, Baptism and Communion, as dominically instituted signs and seals of grace; they have never accepted that marriage is a sacrament in this technical sense. Jesus himself did not institute marriage, nor urge it on others, nor enter into it himself. The fullness of his humanity and the identification he enjoyed with the Father were in no way diminished by his being single, and there is no suggestion in the gospels that blood ties of marriage and family either define or restrict our relationships within the Kingdom of God. ("Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" "In the Kingdom of God they neither marry nor are given in marriage."¹⁴) Married people have no specially privileged access to God, and they are not more truly or more fully human than those who do not marry.

4:7 The ecumenical conversation of the twentieth century, and particularly the deep Orthodox sense of the sacramentality of creation, has suggested a looser and wider sense of sacramentality in which we may appropriately speak of marriage: the sense in which the Church of Scotland has been happy to speak of "holy matrimony", believing that marriage at its best is transparent of the goodness of God, offering glimpses of the joy, fidelity and communion which mark the life of the Kingdom, and enjoying the benediction of God's lovingkindness. This sense of marriage as a sacramental mystery is confirmed by the widespread human experience of the marriage relationship as the most precious and deep exploration people make in their life history.

4:8 The implication of the Adam and Eve narrative in Genesis is that marriage is provided by God as a gift to humankind as such, not only to the Covenant people. In this Report we are concerned to present a Christian understanding of marriage *as such*, not of the distinctive commitments and perceptions of marriage between Christians. For the latter, all the specific imagery of the New Testament, of covenantal theology, and of the analogy between Christ and Church, husband and wife, may deepen the hope and intention of the relationship. But we do

¹⁴ Mark 3:33-35, Mark 12:25.

¹⁵ Recent Protestant-Roman Catholic Dialogue has brought about a possible rapprochement on the senses in which marriage may and may not be considered "sacramental". *The Condemnations of the Reformation Era. Do They Still Divide?*, ed. Karl Lehmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg (Minneapolis, Fortress, 1990), pp. 130-145.

not wish to endorse a two-tier theology of marriage, in which one set of standards and commendations belongs to Christians who marry, and a different set to others. We take it that the "Theology of Marriage" has to be an inclusive term, not restricted to the case of marriage between Christians, however distinctive and unique that may be.

4:9 Thus, God's gift of this relationship is offered to Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, aboriginal people, atheists, polytheists etc. In some cultures where the structuring of marriage is not monogamous (e.g. in certain tribal African communities, or in Islam) there is clearly an issue for the Christian community to face, an issue bound up with questions of mission, witness and the theology of culture. (For instance, the 1988 Lambeth Conference reversed the decision of 1888 that all Christians with more than one wife in polygamous African contexts should put away all but one of these women. This decision was made on pastoral grounds, to do with the safeguarding of the women's identity in the fabric of the community. But the normative insistence in post-baptistal Christian discipline is that all subsequent polygamy is renounced. It remains a contentious issue, however, among indigenous African theologues whether Western patterns of monogamy are as uniquely privileged in Scripture or Church tradition as we often claim they are.)

4:10 We in Britain, though, inherit a culture in which, until recently, the interpenetration of Judeo-Christian understanding and civil law and customary practice was virtually complete. Deviations from heterosexual monogamy were publicly deplored and/or punished; and the socio-political climate paid more than lip-service to the structuring of family and community life round such permanent unions. Recent calls for traditional morality and unspecified "family values" may indicate a growing wish to return to a moral climate governed in part at least by social constraint and discrimination.

5. CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF MARRIAGE AND OTHER RELATIONSHIPS

5:1 In the last few decades, many of the identifications between the structures of Judeo-Christian society and the patterns of civil secular life have weakened. Several legal and political changes have contributed to this, such as:

- the legal extension of grounds for divorce
- changed practice with regard to mortgage lending, allowing cohabiting, unmarried couples to share mortgages
- the recognition of cohabitation in relation to occupancy rights in a "matrimonial home"
- the removal of the formal status of illegitimacy from children born out of wedlock
- the de-criminalising of adult consenting homosexual relationships

It is difficult to assess whether these changes in law have *caused* a change in social attitudes or whether they *reflect* a shift which had already taken place in the moral and social climate. Probably no direct cause and effect can be established, and the changes in law indicate no more than an ongoing mutual inter-relationship between public structures and informal attitudes.

5:2 Traditional patterns of marriage and the nuclear family can no longer be assumed to be the norm. The number of people entering into first time marriages fell by more than half in England and Wales between 1971 and 1991. Of cohabiting couples in the United Kingdom formally identified as a household, only 61% are married, with 28% of the remainder being single people, 1% widowed, 8% divorced and 3% separated. Almost one fifth of all children are nurtured in lone parent families, 18% by lone mothers and 1% by lone fathers. Of the 18% of lone mothers, 6% are unmarried, 6% are divorced and 4% separated, with only 1% widowed. In Scotland, 13.5% of marriages currently end in divorce, and the curve is rising. Almost half the divorced men and one fifth of the divorced women remarry. No statistics are available for same-sex couples establishing a household, but there is informal evidence that the decriminalisation of adult homosexual relationships has enabled long-term same-sex partnerships to gain legal and financial recognition.

5:3 One possible response by the Church to these rapidly changing social patterns would be to lament the dwindling influence of the Church within the community and to interpret the changes as evidence of a lurch away from Christian standards and family values towards

irresponsibility and moral chaos. We believe that such a response would be simplistic and misleading, since it fails to take account of those committed Christians who choose, quite deliberately and in good faith, patterns of relationship other than traditional marriage. The incidence of divorce and re-marriage continues to rise dramatically (re-marriage of divorcees now accounts for one third of all marriages in the United Kingdom)¹⁵ not just in the secular world but also among those who have married with Christian intent and commitment. Alternative patterns of relationship to heterosexual marriage (e.g. living together, same-sex partnerships etc.) are chosen by some Christian people with no sense of guilt or shame—although some who have been living together and then come to be married in church feel furtive about their cohabitation in the presence of a minister, and many Christians of homosexual orientation wrestle constantly with guilt and feel unsure of their reception by the Church if they disclose the nature of their relationship. Inside and outside the churches, sad awareness is growing of how often family (or Christian community) has been a context of abuse of the vulnerable, making the phrase "family values" an ironic one in many cases.¹⁷

5.4 The immense growth in feminist consciousness and literature has raised questions about marriage as an institution, suggesting that many of its traditional associations reflect an ingrained patriarchal mentality—fathers "giving away" daughters to husbands, brides changing their surnames etc. For Christian feminists, the "redeeming" of marriage (an impossibility for some) depends on its ability to free itself from the male domination of the past and to become (or be restored to) a relationship of free and equal partners. This raises questions about the biblical patterns of "headship" within marriage. Do these belong intrinsically to Christian understanding, or are they disposable relics of a past culture? Within Christian history there are many injunctions or assumptions on which the Church has changed its mind or moved forward in its understanding of Scripture. Among these are the biblical and Christian acceptance of slavery, the rejection of interest rates (usury), the apostolic prohibition on eating "what is strangled and blood", circumcision, capital punishment and killing, the law of tithing, the feudal ordering of society and monarchical government, divorce, artificial contraception.

5.5 The Church, therefore, is facing a new situation. It can no longer be assumed that those who enter into relationships other than marriage, even *Christians* who enter into such relationships, will accept the traditional evaluation of their lifestyle as deviant, morally wrong, or a matter for contrition, repentance and change. Their numbers make it quite unrealistic for the Church to treat them as rare exceptions to Christian standards, and the very prevalence of Christian lifestyles other than marriage opens up complex issues of pastoral care and discipline. It seems to us undeniable that a huge gulf has opened up between the Church's traditional teaching and the views of many younger church members. It is a gulf which perhaps extends beyond the young: many parents feel respect, rather than censure, for life choices made by their children which are different from the choices they themselves made.

5.6 The discrepancy between traditional teaching and contemporary experience is probably more familiar to church members than we generally acknowledge. Sadly, it is often easier to discuss the realities of modern relationships in the context of a seminar, a fraternal, a golf club, a pub or a hairdresser's shop than in the church. Many pastors know that a significant proportion of those they marry will have lived with one another before the wedding, and that many more will have been sexually intimate. Many parents know or suspect that their children's serious relationships include sexual intercourse before marriage is even contemplated, and/or that they may enter into long-term commitments in life-sharing without marrying. Others wrestle with the knowledge or suspicion that their children are gay or lesbian. Some recognise that they themselves, in days when there was much less social tolerance, entered into marriage as a way of avoiding the recognition of their own latent homosexuality or bisexuality; others live with the problems of a marriage in which such self-knowledge is suppressed because it is too painful. Such situations are well documented in the experience of those who work for secular agencies like Marriage Counselling Scotland, but they are equally familiar to those working in Christian counselling agencies.

5.7 Tensions and uncertainties within the Church on sexual matters may be related to the even wider gulf between official Church teaching and the assumptions of secular society. The major agencies which work with teenagers (e.g. the Brook Advisory Centres) take it for granted and accept, non-judgementally, that sexual activity is normal. Much media coverage, many chat-shows, and the incidental comments of "agony aunts" regard sexual exploration and experimentation as part of normal healthy development. Most public utterances about sexual relationships (e.g. "Take Care with Sex" on Edinburgh buses) mention abstinence, if they mention it at all, only as one of several options without seeming to make any moral evaluation.

5.8 Those with no Christian commitment rarely see the Church's traditional teaching on the matter as showing any enviable wisdom or commendable idealism. Not always understanding the best reasons for it, they find it bizarre, out of touch with reality, and often censorious or hypocritical. There is a considerable communication problem for anyone wishing to commend or explain a Christian view of marriage, of sexuality, or of relationship. There is the fundamental problem of interpreting and justifying the Christian tradition of marriage and the refusal of all other sexual relationships. There is an added problem in that this has to be done in a climate of expectation which portrays the Church, at least in this area of life, as intrusive, moralising, nervous and incoherent.

5.9 Aware of how much Western social thinking has altered in the last generation, most of the churches have been undertaking major reappraisals of their stance on sexuality and marital ethics.¹⁸ In all of these there has been a recognition of the diversity of Christian responses existing in the mainstream historic churches. Although the problems are not exclusive to the twentieth century, there is also recognition that they cannot now be dismissed in terms of self-evident moral bankruptcy. The methods of identification, the assumptions about normality/abnormality and the criteria for classification are all contested, as is the range of affective influences—genetic, psychological, socio-cultural etc.¹⁹

5.10 Once it is recognised that such diversity of thought exists, it is vital for proper order and pastoral guidance that Churches which are willing to reassess the dominant traditional position give some coherent account in theological terms of their openness to plurality, rather than dismissing sexual ethics as a matter for individual judgement. If the Church is to adhere unwaveringly to its traditional standards and thought forms, it must support these with more convincing and positive arguments than it often has in the past. Conversely, if a change from this traditional stance is being advocated, the onus is on the advocates of change to explain why this is appropriate. There need to be guidelines which interpret and justify the ethical diversity the Church is willing to tolerate, and the grounds for its decision making need to be articulated. The Church of Scotland comes relatively late to public debate on some of the issues raised by our remit, and we acknowledge that much of the argument at theological level has been substantially explored in the reports specified above.

6. THE CHURCH'S REACTION TO CHANGING PATTERNS

6.1 Many within the Church believe sincerely that the only responsible evangelical response to changing social patterns is to uphold traditional teaching and practice: marriage between one man and one woman for life, sexual abstinence before marriage, fidelity within marriage. They distrust shifts in perception and lifestyle as merely "the wisdom of the world" (or perhaps more accurately "the foolishness of the world") to be resisted as irrelevant or even

¹⁵ E.g. Methodist Conference Commission

Keeping Body and Soul Together: Sexuality, Spirituality and Social Justice, Presbyterian Church U.S.A., 1991

Living in Human Sexuality, Church House Publishing, London 1991

Report of Commission on Human Sexuality, Methodist Publishing House, 1990

Report of the Homosexuality Working Party of the United Reformed Church, 1991

Venians Splendor, The Vatican, 1993

¹⁹ Michael Ruse, *Homosexuality: A Philosophical Enquiry*, Oxford, 1988; Judith Reisman and Edward W. Eichel,

Kinsey: Sex and Freud, Lafayette, 1990

hostile to the standards of the Kingdom. We recognise that there is a clear body of opinion in the Church of Scotland which wishes to uphold this position, believing it to be clear unambiguous biblical teaching.

6.2 Yet many within the Church believe equally sincerely that such an uncompromising traditional stance is an over-simplification of contemporary Christian experience. They perceive real tensions between their inherited Christian codes on the one hand, and the realities of secular life and new readings of Scripture and tradition on the other. For them, whether they are pastors or responsible Christian adults in the thick of contemporary life, a straightforward sense of black and white values, of absolute right and wrong, seems not to fit their experience in this particular domain. They long for a way of interpreting, in Christian terms, the complexity they feel.

6.3 Some churches recognise these two sincerely held positions. They try to make room for them by allowing a maximum of pastoral discretion while officially affirming traditional standards as the ideal. The Church of England's House of Bishops 1991 Statement, for instance, recognises it as possible to include within the Christian fellowship those who in good faith commit themselves to a "loving and faithful homophilic partnership", although it insists on celibacy as the norm for clergy of gay orientation. Informally, bishops and senior clergy will sometimes go against the letter of this latter law, provided that relationships are stable and, predictably, circumspect. And in some cases, most conspicuously that of the American Episcopal Church, some clergy who are publicly "out" as homosexual partners are also ordained. Within this range of practice, the gap between official statement and pastoral practice is itself variously perceived: by some as constituting a hypocritical double standard, by others as a way of operating with creative flexibility ahead of the legal *status quo*.

6.4 The fact that the General Assembly has given two simultaneous remits, to the Panel on Doctrine on Marriage and to the Board of Social Responsibility on Human Sexuality, signals a clear recognition of the need for examination and open debate of the issues involved. We believe it is vital, for the wellbeing of the Church and for any guidance that it gives to those outside the Church, that the examination should be conducted with manifest openness, honesty and mutual generosity. With whatever convictions we approach these complex questions, it is vital that we credit those who differ from us with the same conviction and sincerity. Disagreement and prayerful debate have been since apostolic times part of the Church's life as it has wrestled to interpret the faith for successive generations. The questions raised by both remits are questions of deep concern to the entire Church. They also touch on deep and private aspects of our human lives, aspects of which most of us as individuals find it difficult to speak freely; so there is a danger that we rationalise either our own longings or our own fears without acknowledging, even to ourselves, what our motivation is. Some of those who speak most strongly for permissive attitudes, in the name of "freedom" or "liberation", may themselves have a deep fear of any long-term stable relationship which would expose their painful vulnerability. Some of the most staunch advocates of uncompromising traditional moral standards (often masquerading as "Christian morality" or "Family Values") may themselves have experienced the pain of rejection or the limitations of an unfulfilling marriage, and feel unconscious envy of the possibilities enjoyed by others. However the debate proceeds within the Church, and whatever its outcome, in view of the deep complexities of these issues it would be tragic if its outcome were to create pressure—either from traditional or innovative stances—to excommunicate those of different persuasions as illegitimate.

6.5 There is a further danger, that when issues are debated only within Church courts they may reflect not only a personal but also an ecclesiastical motivation. Ministers and office-bearers often hesitate to raise in Presbytery or Session personal concerns or unorthodox views which they feel are at odds with widely accepted Church teaching or may reflect unfavourably on their family life. This may not be consciously acknowledged, especially in the case of ministers—who are often alleged now to be unsure of their social and vocational identity. In the past, for instance in its initial response to the idea of evolution in creation, the Church has often reacted defensively to pressures and challenges from the "secular" world. Part of the reason for such defensiveness has been a proper caution against conforming to the wisdom or the standards of the world, part has been alarm at the destructiveness of a morally

chaotic universe, in which standards seem to have been disappearing from public recognition. In the present context there is a danger that the Church may confuse its concern for human wellbeing in the community with a less worthy desire to maintain its own social power and control, as the arbiter of standards of righteousness.

6.6 Despite these dangers of unconscious motivation—dangers to be acknowledged rather than feared—we remain convinced that the Church has a constant call to be aware of the pressures and changes in the world of which it is part and to speak prophetically in relation to them. We do not presume, though, that the Church has a monopoly of wisdom, insight or truth, and would regret any tendency to discredit insights and perspectives from sources not specifically Christian (e.g. psychologists, counsellors, sociologists). We affirm that God is God of the whole world, and that understanding of his truth comes in a process of unfinished conversation between Church and world as we seek to understand the Word of God in Scripture, tradition and current Church practice.

7. CONTEMPORARY STRAINS ON MARRIAGE AND POSSIBLE CHURCH ACTION

7.1 Marriage was affirmed by last year's General Assembly as "a gift of God to his human creatures, the normative context of the deepest and most joyful relationship between man and woman, enhanced for Christian partners by their shared faith and their perception of God as source of all love".²⁰ The Panel remains committed to that affirmation, on the biblical grounds cited in last year's report, also in recognition of the experience enjoyed by millions of married couples who maintain even after several decades of shared living that their marriage was the best thing that ever happened to them. In an ideal world all couples wishing to live together would do so permanently and exclusively, in a marriage relationship.

7.2 Since marriage is the norm of man-woman sexual relationships, and since man-woman relationships have a direct bearing on procreation and child-rearing, the strength or weakness of marriage has a direct bearing on the wellbeing of each rising generation. The collapse of marriage nearly always involves hurt and loss of wellbeing for at least one partner and for any children of the union. Marriage therefore is more than a matter of personal choice and moral conduct; it has a dimension of social significance too. The health or frailty of individual marriages has a cumulative knock-on effect on the stability and wellbeing of the community and the nation. On social as well as on theological grounds, then, the Church has to be concerned with the institution of marriage as part of its concern for the life of the world. We share with the rest of society a vested interest in the nurturing of marriage. The perception of God's love, is paralleled on an institutional level by the Church's perception that we are created to live in community and that God invites his creatures towards the same faithfulness, the same long-suffering, the same trust, the same enabling love that he himself has shown to all of us. The strength of marriage as a social institution, therefore, is directly related to the Church's evangelical longing to see God's love recognised, reflected and earthed within the fabric of society.

7.3 Marriage, however, has never been easy, as the literature and folk-lore of the world—as well as common experience—document. The mythology of commercialised romanticism fails to portray the demanding and costly side of long term co-existence, the struggles and stresses of ordinary life. Energy and vision can be sapped by pressures such as tiredness, financial worry, domestic problems, sexual difficulties, incompatibilities of temperament or values, boredom, the demands of child rearing—some of which afflict most relationships at some point, and give the lie to any utopian account of marriage. We recognise that the lived experience both of spouses and of children may be of a bleak and dysfunctional relationship which stunts the growth of those involved. Rather than wringing our hands at the incidence of divorce, we should perhaps marvel that for so many people this relationship of

²⁰ Assembly Reports 1993, p. 195.

intimate co-existence does remain a context of basic growth and sustaining, and that it can so often be celebrated after a whole lifetime as an inestimable gift: a gift in which two people have cherished each other's individuality, while growing together into mellowed understanding and interaction, and in which they have been enabled to provide a secure supportive context for children to grow in.

7:4 In the shifting social patterns of the late twentieth century in Western Europe, a number of factors have emerged to influence and increase the strains which have always been part of the marriage relationship. Most obvious among these are:

- (a) the accelerating loss of "extended family" living, with the consequent isolation of the nuclear family and the pressures this isolation can bring
- (b) the pressure to balance and evaluate the demands of two careers with the other needs of the couple or the family
- (c) the earlier onset of puberty and increased sexual precocity, combined with a widespread ideology of sexual self-gratification
- (d) the growing recognition of many women and some men, that marriage often assumes structures of an earlier patriarchal society which are no longer acceptable to many people
- (e) widespread awareness within all age-groups that marriages are precarious and sometimes fragile, and that divorce is increasingly prevalent and socially acceptable. This can bring loss of public confidence in the institution and also make it more difficult for couples to make marriage vows without some "escape clause" at the back of their consciousness—which in turn is likely to erode their commitment if they encounter difficulties later.
- (f) the common, and increasingly socially accepted, alternatives of long term partnerships other than marriage, which relativise the sense of marriage as the normative relationship.

7:5 Christians are as much affected as others by these factors. Our responsibility to address and challenge the world involves a responsibility to listen to it and to seek to understand it accurately—not to demonise it or to caricature its attitudes. In Scotland, Church and world still interpenetrate each other's existence to a remarkable extent. The Church will only be able to address the world with integrity where in its own fellowship it finds ways of sustaining marriage and family life. Such fellowship will be characterised also by the inclusion of the unmarried and those who do not belong to the typical nuclear family. In assisting its own people to find fulfilment in marriage the Church is also called upon to address the world. We should seek common cause with those who attempt to lessen the pressures on marriage and family life in our society by, for example, arguing for the provision of pre-school education, paternity leave and the equal treatment of part-time workers.²¹ We should also resist glib rhetorical calls for unspecified family values which often appear hurtful or alienating to those whose own relationships have not worked out as they had hoped.

7:6 We can only commend marriage if we show it to be capable of being a fruitful, nourishing and sustaining environment for those involved, since we believe that, like the Sabbath, marriage was "made for man". It is because God saw that "it is not good for man to be alone" that the institution of marriage came to exist. Its justification is bound up with human wellbeing and with its capacity to enhance that wellbeing. The characterisation of love in I Corinthians 13 is the model of all good personal relationship, and applies also to the more specific commitment of marriage. Without this pervasive agape no relationship can flourish. We therefore have to take seriously those things in the life and history of the Church which have obscured the connection between marriage and such undergirding love, and have made "Christian marriage" seem unattractive to some people in spite of the Church's high doctrines of that relationship.

7:7 Marriages which remain technically faithful can sometimes be bleak and cramping places for those involved; often the Church's preoccupation with sexual fidelity has left it failing to address this more pervasive and eroding sadness. We must recognise that the Church

has, in much of its traditional utterance and practice, accepted and reinforced a patriarchal account of family structures which makes women subservient to men. This account has treated women, informally if not officially, as domestic servants or possessions, whose time and energy are at the disposal of husband and family with or without consent. We can chronicle the number of unhappy marriages which now end up in the divorce courts; there is no way to assess whether, or how far, their numbers have increased since the days when divorce was a social disgrace and the economic options available to women were severely restricted. It is certainly the case that the majority of divorce actions are initiated by women, which suggests that they are on the whole demanding more from the marriage relationship than it sometimes appears to offer them. In today's social climate it may well happen (not least in ministers' or office bearers' families²²) that the demands and involvements of the outside world make the stay-at-home spouse feel effectively widowed or widower, while the parent more committed outside the home becomes in effect an absentee to spouse and children.

7:8 Many problems in present-day marriages, including widespread uneasiness and criticism about the institution as such, stem from the legacy of these past and present structural problems with the evolution of marriage, rather than from individual failure of character or of goodwill. They emerge from past and present definitions of family, from traditional role expectations; also from today's relative isolation of the nuclear family, which leaves the small core unit to weather all the stresses of contemporary life without strong or sufficient support. Such pressures increasingly have to be handled in households where both parents have full time work, in which case the easing of financial pressures may be offset by other pressures to do with time and opportunity for communication. They may also arise in households where both parents are unable to find work, in which case anxiety, boredom, hardship and lack of self-esteem can escalate rapidly within the claustrophobic proximity of two tense demoralised adults.

7:9 As stated in last year's Report²³ we are convinced that the Churches could help in the area of marriage preparation. This can help couples to anticipate with realism the difficulties which beset marriages in the areas of time, money, sexuality, decision-making, lack of a support system and communication. The desire to commend marriage and to explore the positive hopes and vision vested in it is not served by avoiding realism about these hard areas. It is even more important, however, that we widen our positive Christian account of fidelity, so that it is understood not just as sexual exclusiveness but in terms of active, dedicated attentiveness to the wellbeing of the other partner. This in turn needs to be set in the context of how the partners may faithfully share a wider outgoing life beyond the immediate family.

7:10 When a marriage takes place in the context of a shared home congregation (which we realise is a situation applying to only a small proportion of marriage services) or when a newly married couple joins a congregation there could perhaps be some sense of shared responsibility comparable to that which exists at Baptism, whereby the congregation undertook some care and support for this new household. There might sometimes be helpful possibilities in the "winning" of older couples with newly-weds. At a later stage in the marriage, single people in congregations might be alerted to possibilities of "buddying" families with small children. Elderly people might be encouraged to develop helpful relationships with young families if the grandparents live far away; trusting accepting contacts between old and young are nearly always beneficial to all generations. Church congregations are rare among social organisations in drawing the generations together, and we might do more to exploit this great strength in the way we seek to foster congregational life and relationships. At present, many who do not themselves belong to a nuclear (parent-child) family unit feel estranged from the Church's "family service" ethos and find it a cause of considerable loneliness.

7:11 Not all individual ministers can be expected to have special skills in marriage enrichment; but the awareness of such enrichment as a pastoral need might be expressed in different ways within the Church's life. Many Church members seem unwilling to confide in their minister if they fear something is going wrong in their marriage—though of course there

²¹ Patricia Hewitt and Penelope Leace, *Social Justice, Children and Families*, Institute for Public Policy Research, London.

²² Episcopal Church in the U.S.A. report on *Clergy Families*, 1991.

²³ Assembly Reports 1991, p. 227.

are exceptions to this, and ministers who have themselves been through the trauma of divorce commonly report that this encourages more members of their congregation to share such problems with them.

7:12 It would be valuable if congregations were made widely aware—as a matter of routine and *before* crises arise—of the resources that exist for sustaining marriages or helping at difficult times. Among these resources are the Marriage Enrichment courses at Carberry Tower, the counselling services offered through Simpson House, The Tom Allan Centre, The Catholic Marriage Advisory Service; also private ecumenical agencies like The Pastoral Foundation and secular ones like Marriage Counselling Scotland. Since such needs run through all denominations, this is an area where ecumenical collaboration would be natural and helpful. An ecumenical approach would also allow more sharing of pastoral resources and experience, would increase pastoral awareness and also the responsibility of office-bearers, mature members and younger people in cross-generational sharing at the local level.

7:13 Because the Church has often spoken publicly about the ideal of marriage in terms of Christ's love for the world and our reciprocation of that love, and sometimes because it has (more in the past than in the present) been perceived as taking a heavily moralistic stance on matters relating to marriage problems, people are sometimes ashamed to trust ministers with their difficulties and opt for the non-judgementalism of a counselling frame of reference. Ministers must, if they are to win the trust of members, manifest in word and attitude a sympathetic appreciation of the human stresses of marriage as well as a vision of the theological ideal. Sharing the deep sense that we *all* depend on God's grace, and that we have access to that grace whatever relative success or failure we make of any aspect of our lives, is a vital pastoral and proclamatory task. It often takes great courage for people to expose the problems of their most intimate relationships. This is an area where verbal assurances are easily discredited by censorious or condescending attitudes on the part of those in whom they confide.

8. HETEROSEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS OTHER THAN MARRIAGE

8:1 The traditional teaching of the Churches is that sexual activity outside marriage is by definition sinful. There are still many who hold to this position and would seek to discipline those in their congregations who go against it. For more and more families, however, the knowledge that adult sons and daughters have sexual relationships within long term friendships with those of the opposite sex, and almost invariably with partners during an engagement, is accepted without significant distress. Long term committed cohabitation without benefit of a wedding ceremony is an increasing experience both inside and outside Christian contexts. The latest survey, claimed to be the most comprehensive ever undertaken in the United Kingdom,²⁴ showed that fidelity is still held in high regard by the British public in contexts both of marriage and of unmarried cohabitation. It also indicated that there has been a rapid and dramatic change in the pattern of sexual activity. Of women born between 1931 and 1935, more than half remained virgins until the age of twenty one or more; of those born between 1966 and 1975 only half were virgins at the age of seventeen; 19% had experienced intercourse before their sixteenth birthday. Within that same age group (born between 1966 and 1975) fewer than one per cent of both men and women delayed their first sexual experience until marriage. For those born thirty years earlier, the figure was 38% for women and 14% for men—which may come as a surprise to those who assume that chastity before marriage was once the norm. Although around one half of men and women claim to have had their first sexual experience in the context of an established relationship, more young people claimed curiosity than love as the main motivation. Those who had their first sexual experience before the age of sixteen were more likely (three times more likely in the case of men, four times in the case of women) to have multiple partnerships even in their forties and fifties.

8:2 There exists within the Church a range of responses to the changed values and behaviour of most young people. Some see them as a sign of moral decadence, a loss of standards and a betrayal of God's gift of sexuality. Some view the changes with indifference, on the grounds that efficient methods of contraception have virtually removed the risk of pregnancy which almost always attended misbehaviour in the past; for them, caution rather than continence is the message they are anxious to impress upon the young. To others, the Churches' preoccupation with other people's sexual behaviour seems a relic of the past when virginity, particularly that of women, was a specification of the intractability of property which belonged to the owning male (father, husband, brother etc). In that context, the interference with her virginity before marriage or with her monogamous state after marriage was a violation of property rights. If these negative grounds were the primary argument for retaining one's virginity, they seem increasingly irrelevant in the contemporary world. Nevertheless, where abstinence from premarital sex is intended as fidelity to the future relationship that is hoped for, the "fidelity in advance" referred to in the first part of this report last year,²⁵ it deserves affirmation as a positive and loving commitment.

8:3 In spite of these varied Christian responses to the current situation, we believe all Christians can unite in the conviction that human sexuality is not to be reduced to sport, or entertainment, or a means to selfish ends. There are important elements of our sexual existence to do with playfulness and pleasure-giving, but these elements are in their proper place only in a wider deeper context of wholehearted personal life-sharing and caring. It was one of the rediscovered insights of the Reformation that this caring was the basic vindication of the marital relationship, and that procreation was not (as it had traditionally been in Judeo-Christian tradition) the be-all and end-all of marriage. When sexuality is separated from the mutual cherishing of whole people, it becomes trivialised and at risk of becoming an exchanged or purchased commodity where there is no sense of the mutuality of persons giving and receiving each other.

8:4 When people fail to honour sexual activity as the expression of a total inter-personal relationship and settle for a diminished or trivialised view of sex as a diversion, we may be wrong to identify this just as individual sin or moral failure. Almost always, such a trivialised view is a consequence of the systematic exploitation of sexual desire and aspiration by the powers of advertising and commerce. Vulnerable young people are made to feel futile, inadequate and ashamed of sexual inexperience, and are constantly bombarded with images of sex as immediate self-gratification. For the Churches to reinforce the conviction that sexuality is rightly expressed within committed, long term relationship, we need not just to challenge individual moral responses and behaviour; we need also to resist the commercialisation of sex at the macro level, in the market place. When we call for personal standards so at odds with the dominant cultural messages associated with power, money and success, we must also tackle the commercial and almost systematic exploitation of people's desire for attractiveness and wellbeing. We believe it is important to challenge the suggestion that the loss of virginity is a sign of maturity and that multiple sexual relationships signify sophistication. The subliminal messages that sex is a means to other personal or political ends must be identified and resisted at all levels; otherwise, people will sense from the Church merely an isolated demand for heroism and negative virtue, with a gap in their lives which other people are at liberty to fill with sexual activity.

8:5 We need, then, to clarify above all that Christian moral energy in this area is fired by the insistence that sex belongs in the context of shared and mutual giving, in which persons are committed to loving each other. Only if we are credible witnesses to that concern for holistic secure relationships are we likely to appeal to the deep God-given yearning in most people, Christian or not, for such safe belonging together. If we can enlarge and sustain and encourage those desires in people, rather than condemning the brokenness and fragmentariness of their imperfect relationships (and who among us has perfect relationships?) we may be able to harness good energies, and be less judgemental than we sometimes appear. When God's commands are understood as convergent with our deepest need and wellbeing, they are less likely to be heard as arbitrary and interfering. We are not talking here about a facile or

²⁴ Kaye Wellings et al., *Sexual Behaviour in Britain*, Penguin, 1994.

²⁵ Assembly Reports 1993, p.222.

individualistic ideology of "self-realisation", but about the basic Christian sense of how we are sustained as persons by "indwelling" in love.

8:6 In this sense we understand chastity to be a much more positive grace than the abstinence from sexual escapades or even the preservation of virginity. Chastity exists within relationships, not only as a negative value of abstinence but as a deep and inherently affirmative moral value, involving integrity, loyalty, fidelity and purity of heart and body together. As such, it is invariably violated by casual, promiscuous or exploitative sex. It is less clear that it is threatened by the mutual self-giving of two people who love each other and who hope to make a life together. It would be a very crude moral code which fails to differentiate between casual one night stands and the sleeping together of an engaged couple. It is important to recognise that it is the mutual willing commitment in love which constitutes the relationship, rather than its statutory recognition in the wedding ceremony. Nevertheless, the solemnisation of the marriage, whether or not sexually anticipated, is certainly important in terms of the social, public and ecclesiastical witness it offers to the intention of permanent faithful loving. But we must recognise that some of the taboo against even betrothed pre-marital sex was, until recently, the fear of pregnancy out of wedlock and its consequences for all those involved. Now, the removal of the status of illegitimacy from children born outside marriage, the availability of effective contraception, the diminishing stigma attaching to single parents, remove large elements of that fear, forcing us to address the question of whether virginity as such is a virtue for Christians or others to bring to their marriage.

8:7 At the same time, we believe it is important to affirm that celibacy or singleness is a valid life-choice, gift or vocation. This should not be seen, as it often is in popular assumption and even in Christian attitudes, as second-best, conveying an image of "failing to find the right person" or pitiable isolation. Single and celibate people may, just as much as married or sexually active people, be involved in rich and deep relationships of friendship and creative interaction. The single and the celibate also express eros in a multiplicity of ways, though not through genital acts. The recognition of sexuality as a wellspring of outgoing relatedness in all of us is important, if such people are not to be made to feel second class citizens in an ethos dominated by couples and families. The integrity, commitment, devotion and gifts of single and celibate people deserve wider acknowledgement, both in word and deed within the structures of Church life and also in the wider community. The sublimation of potentially sexual energy into religion, service, art, friendship and other forms of creative living is not to be denigrated or read as negative. While clearly there are some for whom enforced celibacy is a cause of sadness or even frustration, for many others celibacy is a choice: a way of self-dedication both to God and to the surrounding community and a mode of being available to love in a way which is not available to those committed to the structures of family life or permanent partnership.

8:8 There are risks involved both in the affirming of the traditional stance and in its weakening. When people marry in sexual ignorance/innocence, their desire for full intercourse may skew their self-knowledge about other aspects of the relationship. If they already have an established sexual relationship, the question of why they want to marry is less likely to be answered by "So that we can have legitimate sex". On the other hand, it is a clear implication of loving someone unconditionally and of accepting them for better or worse that a couple will be willing to work through the knowns or unknowns of their sexual life together within the framework of commitment which the marriage has sealed. It is at odds with that open trust and commitment to exploration and discovery for either partner to have to prove sexual virtuosity in advance. It often takes time for a couple, new to the intimacies of love-making, to enjoy an uninhibited and mutually satisfying sexual relationship. Within the security of a marriage relationship this can be accepted without anxiety as part of the adventure of discovering each other. Detached from that security, any less-than-successful attempts at sexual fulfilment could too easily be interpreted by either partner as a quite premature indication of failure or of incompatibility. Contrary to widely held opinion, the divorce rate among those who have lived together before marriage is twice as high as it is among those who live apart until their wedding.²⁶

²⁶ *Social Trends*, 1994 edition (H.M.S.O.).

8:9 In young people still growing into adulthood the power of sexual desire is easily confused with durable love. The detachment of one from the other may prove to be extremely wounding. Teaching them that the desire is best satisfied in the context of the durable love is the basic message we would wish to communicate to those both inside and outside the Church. We do not consider that the primary incentive to fidelity and monogamy should be one of prudential fear; in the past both Church and parents have too often taken refuge in the threat of dire consequences that might follow misbehaviour. And yet we have to recognise that promiscuity, indeed any multiple sexual partnership, does carry immense risks of infection, and that many young people are insufficiently aware of these risks or are incapable of handling them in spur of the moment situations. It seems likely that any increased acceptance of promiscuity (however we define that word) is at least a contributory factor to the multiple breakdown of stable relationships. It is no coincidence that the ability to marriage breakdown is increased by any assumption of multiple sexual relationships as normal or normative.

8:10 Similarly, the fact that in some circles marriage itself is seen as a provisional and perhaps temporary arrangement, to be terminated when it becomes too stressful or unrewarding, must itself weaken the commitment to make this relationship work. There is a real distinction to be made both pastorally and ethically between a complacent acceptance of serial monogamy as a deliberately chosen lifestyle and the evangelical generosity of holding out to those whose committed relationship has come to grief God's gifts of forgiveness, healing, and the possibility of new relationship.

8:11 Growth in sexual self-awareness is a part of responsible growing up. Learning to love and trust securely as whole persons, distinguishing love from infatuation, growing into a comfortable happy sense of our being as sexual creatures: all these are part of our education in Christian and human response to God's gift of sexuality, and many stages in safe mutual intimacy lead towards that. The impact of Christian teaching about sexuality, often implicit rather than explicit, has sometimes sadly meant the reinforcing of permanent associations of shame and guilt with *all* sexuality, with disastrous consequences for marital happiness. And although most recent Christian documents affirm sexuality as one of the good gifts of creation, there is still a widely perceived sense of malaise and distrust as the primary response of the Church to happy discovery of what this means. In the common processes of social interchange (in school, at parties, on the dance floor, at the work place) and in the particular setting of possibly many male-female relationships, we discover our own sexuality as we grow through adolescence into adulthood. We learn to read signals, to value the company of individual members of the opposite sex, to enjoy increasing closeness with them.

8:12 Since the days of chaperones, successive generations (of parents at least) have sought to place varying limits on how close such closeness should be. Christian parents, and others who care both about their children's welfare and about the moral and physical health of the community, are faced with hard questions about guidance and control. As cited above (8:1), the latest comprehensive survey of sexual behaviour in Britain indicates that only 1% of the population now marry as virgins. Fewer than 20% regard pre-marital sexual intercourse as intrinsically wrong. This does not, of course, settle the ethical question, but it means that parents who wish to commend an absolute veto on premarital intercourse will not be sustained by the "common sense" morality of the community in the way they might have been in the past. For those who find in the biblical prohibitions of fornication a timeless and absolute condemnation of all premarital intercourse, there is no ethical dilemma. But for many there is a more complex question about how much freedom and responsibility young people have to work out appropriate behaviour in the area of sexual intimacy, depending on their maturity and ability to distinguish a relationship of real commitment from transient and casual encounters.

8:13 The central vision we wish to give young people is one of physical intimacy belonging in a relationship of committed loyalty which hopes and intends to be permanent. The testimony of parental relationships in which this commitment has offered confidence, security and joy is a much more convincing mode of persuasion than that of threat and judgement. In a public climate which pressurises them towards sexual experience, young people need to be given role models of glad waiting for their hopes. During adolescence they have to be helped to

recognise that the surging and receding emotions of that stage of development may be easily mistaken for the kind of love which survives time, change and the multiple challenges of a shared life. Adolescence is a time of emotional, hormonal and social confusion. The advocacy of celibacy as a positive harvesting of one's future—as well as a safeguard against hurt, exploitation, disease and the cheapening of God's gift of sexuality—deserves positive Christian support.

8:14 At the same time, most parents recognise (though often with some difficulty) that the adulthood of their children demands of them as parents trust, recognition of their children's integrity, and a willingness to love and support them even through decisions which may not coincide with their own practice or policy. There comes a stage when young people will make their own responsible judgements about what degree of sexual intimacy belongs to a given relationship. The Church, both in its public witness and in the pastoral nurture shared by parents, ministers and elders, cannot relinquish its own ideal; yet it must also recognise the integrity and seriousness of commitment involved in many relationships which do not coincide with that ideal. We have to acknowledge that for many people the act of penetrative intercourse is part of a continuum of sexual intimacy, not an absolute watershed between acceptable and prohibited behaviour. "Becoming one flesh" is not, at its deepest, a matter of genital proximity, but of the deep long-term learning of mutual embodied cherishing of which penetrative intercourse is one element. The Christian challenge lies in helping people to see sexual activity in the context of that total mutuality, rather than labelling specific acts of sexual intimacy as right or wrong.

8:15 This same criterion suggests that marriages which are technically acceptable by traditional standards—i.e. between two virgins who then remain permanently monogamous—may actually be judged in terms of much wider criteria of committed fidelity such as trust, tenderness, open communication etc. and may, incidentally, be bad marriages. We believe for example that the use of the phrase "living in sin" should be mentally and morally abandoned: first, because it seems to apply to a selected group a phrase which characterises aspects of our shared human life and involves us all; second, because it refers specifically to the supposed illicitness of sexual intercourse in a non-marital context, but ignores the "living in sin" which characterises relationships of marital backbiting, mutual emotional neglect, possessiveness etc.

8:16 While it is always open to us to give, by word and deed, witness to the specific Christian vision of lifelong, faithful marriage, we do not wish to exclude from the Christian community those who responsibly and conscientiously make other life-choices. We recognise that they too bring gifts and insights from their own relationships (whether heterosexual or gay or lesbian) and we believe that the Church has much to learn, and much need to learn, both about its own attitudes and about the gifts God affords to others who find that marriage is not their way of relating.

9. SAME SEX RELATIONSHIPS

9:1 One of the elements in "the life Christians live now" which has changed significantly since three decades ago is that there is more open awareness of and, in some circles, tolerance of same-sex relationships. For many gay and lesbian people, "marriage" is not a category they seek to adopt, since it seems to them to belong properly to the heterosexual world, and possibly to the more sinister heterosexual assumptions that *only* heterosexual "pivotal couples" define social reality. The Panel would endorse the view that the term "marriage", with its time-honoured and universal connotations of male/female relationship and the foundation of family life, is not an appropriate term for homosexual partnership.

9:2 Nevertheless, many gay and lesbian partners do seek and intend permanent commitment, some with explicit Christian understanding of their relationship as God-given and God-sustained. That this view can be maintained with integrity often seems incredible to Christians who have never met gay or lesbian partners, or who have never raised the questions mentioned earlier about the possible cultural conditioning of scriptural attitudes. It will not

seem so strange to those who have witnessed the real love and caring which exist in many homosexual partnerships. Those who have stood in a pastoral relationship to the early victims of AIDS have often been humbled by the devoted cherishing exhibited by the partners of the patients (although these same partners are sometimes completely ignored in their bereavement and denied even a mention at their loved one's funeral).

9:3 There is a strong need for the Church to listen attentively to the experience and analysis of its gay and lesbian members, also to listen to those outside the Church, many with a sense of exclusion not of their choosing, who find themselves denigrated by much Christian reaction. This is not, theologically, the minimal demand for courtesy and respect due to any fellow human being in whom the image of God is to be cherished. It is more specific—to do with understanding their sexuality. If we wish to suggest that the ultimate vindication of a marriage lies in the free, mutual giving and receiving of selfhood, which makes for the wholeness of the partners, body, mind and soul, there has to be significant reason given for denying a comparable wholeness to people of same-sex orientation.

9:4 Christian censure in the past has often focussed on the non-procreative character of same-sex relationships. Logically, this argument would also cast aspersions on all marriages between the elderly and between couples in which one partner is infertile. It would also restrict the range of sexual activity considered permissible within marriage, although the Reformed Church has not insisted that all intercourse within marriage should be potentially procreative.

9:5 There is a widely felt concern that same-sex relationships constitute a bad influence on the rest of the community and a threat to those at a vulnerable age or stage of development. Since many adolescents go through a phase of homosexual attraction as a normal part of growing towards adult heterosexuality, there is clearly a danger that they may be confused or diverted from the next stage of their sexual development if they are subjected to strong pressures or premature experience of homosexual relations at this transient stage. But the same danger faces young people forced into premature heterosexual pressure or experience. All sexual exploitation, and all pressurising of the young, should be strongly resisted by the Church, and this means that there are some adults—sadists, paedophiles of both heterosexual and homosexual orientation—whose inclinations can never be allowed legitimate expression. People whose sexual desires attract them to victims and children must accept that abstinence is for them the only valid Christian course. In the relationships they seek there is no mutuality, no freedom, no responsible, loving commitment. It is, however, as misleading to equate homosexuality with paedophilia as to equate parenthood with child abuse. Proportionally, the young are more at risk from heterosexuals than from gays.

9:6 Since, for us, marriage is no longer tied to procreation but is vindicated by the love and the commitment it sustains, and since we believe God welcomes and invites such relationships between men and women for their own sake, the relevant question is whether he may welcome them also for homosexual people. Those who view homosexuality as a psychiatric disorder comparable to paedophilia will feel that no sexual expression is ever permissible. Others will respond that faithful homosexual love is not about self-gratification any more than heterosexual love is. Both involve costly mutual cherishing in which one sustaining element, not necessarily the most important one, is the giving and receiving of sexual joy. Given our increasing understanding of human sexuality in this century, it seems arbitrary and cavalier of the heterosexual majority to deny their gay brothers and sisters the fullness of relationship they themselves enjoy—unless they are sure that such relationship is utterly repugnant to God, or damaging to wider human wellbeing.

9:7 It was clear at last year's General Assembly that many commissioners were startled and many were shocked to hear that a same-sex couple in a long term relationship had sought and received a ministerial affirmation of that relationship. It is likely that in future years more such requests may be made to ministers if couples learn (as the Panel's Working Party hopes they will) that their love dares speak its name inside the Church. We believe it would be wrong for Church courts either to prescribe or to forbid such affirmations: that ministers must be credited with the same discretion, moral judgement and pastoral sensitivity which they exercise at present in the matter of re-marrying divorcees or baptising the children of unmarried parents. Those whose faith encompasses the possibility of God's involvement in same-sex relationships have no right to require the same perspective from those who believe as

a matter of conscience that homosexuals should live in perpetual celibacy. Those who regard all homosexual relationship as intrinsically evil have, equally, no right to impose their view on others who perceive in some same-sex partnerships qualities of which they sincerely believe God approves.

9:8 We recognise that the acceptance or rejection of homosexual love as a Christian possibility is a matter of deep conviction on both sides within the Church. Whatever our viewpoint, it deserves to be acknowledged that the firmness forced by Church and society on those of homosexual orientation has itself often contributed to their inability to seek and find stable and faithful companionship, since almost no support structures exist for them. The standard distinction which is often made between accepting the orientation but denouncing all sexual activity, "loving the sinner and hating the sin", seems to same-sex partners who love one another as bizarre as it would in the case of heterosexual love. It is precisely the integration of act and being which constitutes the wholeness of a loving relationship. Much evidence suggests that homosexual orientation is not a matter of moral influence at all, but of disposition recognised against all the conditioning of a heterosexual upbringing, and often struggled against in awareness of probable social consequences.

9:9 The mainstay of the religious argument against active homosexual relationships is in the biblical passages in Romans 1: 18-27 and 1 Corinthians 6: 9, 10 and 1 Timothy 1: 10, with subsidiary Old Testament support. Two kinds of questions arise about these passages for the Christian community. The first is internal—i.e. about the *reference* in Paul's writing. Homosexuality in the Graeco-Roman context was very likely to be pederasty, or some form of occasional homo-erotic behaviour which was quite different from faithful and permanent homosexual love. It cannot be proved whether or not Paul would have reacted with equal negativity to the latter, but it is at least an open question for to-day's Church, in the light of new insights into human sexual orientation not available in Paul's time.

9:10 The second question is more external, and returns us to the hermeneutical issues raised earlier about Scripture and culture. One awareness which was not accessible until the recent past (and would still be controversial or unacknowledged in some quarters) is the recognition of "homophobia"—that is, of irrational individual or social anxiety and hostility to people of same-sex orientation. The question must be faced, not just by Christians but by the whole of society, whether there is truth in the suggestion that many Judeo-Christian attitudes, including some represented in Scripture, are themselves homophobic. Again, this may seem unprovable either way, but the intensity of feeling provoked around the issue is a signal of deeply-rooted emotion, as well as of rational and moral considerations. We believe that the Church of Scotland needs to give itself time to engage in a process of further education about these issues at every level of Church life. Without that process, public pronouncements about same-sex relationships are likely to be dismissed as mere prejudice, and may indeed be so.

9:11 For the first part of this report the Working Party was much indebted to the two named theologians who contributed papers last year. This year we reproduce two submissions from homosexual Christians, one an elder and the other a minister, who draw different conclusions from their recognition of their orientation. Both have asked that their anonymity should be respected.

ONE HOMOSEXUAL'S VIEW

There are not insignificant numbers of us in the Church who have a homosexual orientation and, at the same time, are anxious to keep faith with God and to maintain biblical integrity by refusing to give physical expression to our same-sex preferences, however difficult it may be at times. We accept the message of holy Scripture in its condemnation of all homosexual acts as wrong and against God's revealed will, although such views may go against the grain of much secular thought and practice and leave us open to charges of obscurantism along with the verbal attacks of gay activists.

We reject the modern Kinsey with his crude findings that "everyone is doing it", thereby sanctioning homosexuality as a normal alternative lifestyle, as well as the ancient Socrates arguing that homosexuality is a superior form of human love because it unites "the love of a beautiful body with the love of a beautiful soul". We challenge the wisdom of any of our

contemporaries—however well-meaning—who advocate or endorse what is described as faithful and permanent homosexual love between Christians. Such partnerships are alien to the whole tenor of the Bible where there is neither commendation nor instructions for same-sex relationships. We have taken to heart the truth of God's Word in passages such as 1 Corinthians 6: 9-10 and 1 Timothy 1: 10 in its prohibition of active homosexual encounters of all kinds. As Christian believers, we honestly seek to interpret our predilection in the light of Scripture rather than interpret Scripture in the light of our predilection.

In such an attitude of mind we approach Paul's epistle to the Corinthians, for example, acknowledging that while he does certainly classify homosexual acts as sinful he does not disdainfully single out homosexuals as worse sinners than the others mentioned. Rather than making a special sin out of homosexuality, he simply places it in the same category as drunkenness, theft and fornication. In this, God demonstrates his total impartiality toward all persons in every age. In 1 Corinthians 6: 11 a pivotal statement is made: "And such were some of you." Evidently, radical change has taken place and is plain for all to see. Whether living in circa 55 A.D. or 1994 A.D., we homosexuals who have repented and believed the Good News have abandoned our futile, godless way of life. What's more, the miraculous has happened: we are "in Christ" and having that status we are new creatures: "the old has gone, the new has come!" (11 Corinthians 5: 17). Something of the life of God has entered us, carrying with it far-reaching implications, not least in how we perceive and cope with our particular sexual tendency, and in how we relate to those in a similar situation.

We suggest that in all deliberations involving the homosexual question one important fact should be borne in mind: certain brothers and sisters now seeking to walk in that newness of life, and experiencing true freedom for the first time, have been rescued from backgrounds of appalling homosexual degradation and very likely premature deaths. Some of them will undoubtedly carry deep psychological scars for a long time to come. Because of that, it causes many of us profound distress and hurt to witness the extraordinary spectacle of spiritual leaders charged with feeding or ruling the flock of God apparently encouraging same-sex practices however sophisticated and refined they may appear to be. The last advice any of us redeemed homosexuals need to hear in our daily battles is that, in certain circumstances, the deeds that are "natural" to us are permissible after all!

It must also be recognised that at the other extreme of experience, there are those—often younger Christians—who have a same-sex bias and thus far have led exemplary lives and wish to continue to do so despite pressures to the contrary. Surely any pastoral counsel given to them must be aimed at lovingly strengthening their resolve rather than undermining it by suggesting that a genital homosexual relationship can ever be God-given and God-sustained. In this delicate area, there is a real danger that "little ones" who believe in Jesus are caused to sin.

Clearly, for all of us with homosexual leanings who follow Christ, and whatever our biographies, God has not left us to our own devices. In his love and compassion, he has freely and extravagantly given us the means to live as he intended in his flawless wisdom. He has sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in our hearts by faith bringing strength, comfort, victory, renewal and that unique fellowship for which we were created and purchased by our Lord's shed blood. Well can we gratefully say with Peter, "his divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness" (1 Peter 1: 3).

ANOTHER GAY CHRISTIAN'S VIEW OF HOMOSEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

A reasonable summary of the present attitude of the Church to homosexual activity is "love the sinner, hate the sin".²⁷ The problem with this is that it enforces an impossible

²⁷ This approach clearly underlies the Report of the Study Group on Sexuality to the 1983 General Assembly (Assembly Reports 1983, pp. 302-369). See especially p. 305: "We believe that the practice of homosexual acts is not the way God would have his people live." This Report contains a number of useful insights. Unfortunately its resolution of the conflict described in the first paragraph of the above statement is characterised by impractical and opaque verbiage. See, for instance, p. 308: "The pastor will help souls . . . very near to God." This paragraph offers no effective guidance to the pastor dealing with the young man or woman in crisis.

dichotomy between the person and his/her actions. The gay person is said to be accepted for what s/he is yet rejected for what s/he does, creating an irresolvable tension.

Furthermore, the gay person finds difficulty recognising what s/he does as "sin". Gay behaviour is not usually²⁸ the consequence of a perverse decision to be disobedient to the will of God or to the teachings of the Church: it is for them rather a physical expression of feelings which appear to the gay person just as "natural"²⁹ and "normal" as heterosexual activity is to the "straight" couple. S/he will say, "This is how I am", and if s/he is a Christian s/he may say, more fully, "This is how I am, because this is how God has made me".

The gay Christian would be critical of what s/he would judge to be the exaggerated interest of the Church in the physical, or "carnal", components of homosexual relationships. S/he would look instead to Pauline insights which recognise the things of the flesh as merely transient and temporary, not of ultimate value by comparison with the eternal virtues such as love. S/he may well suspect this exaggerated interest in the physical as springing from prudence rather than from anxiety for the gay man or woman's spiritual wellbeing.

Modern science recognises a much wider variation in human psychological and physical states than the biblical "male and female created he them" would suggest. People with the psychology of a man and the body of a woman (transsexualism) and people with a chromosome set that is neither male (XX) nor female (XY) are just two objective instances—neither, incidentally, related to the phenomenon of homosexuality—which demonstrate the range of human variability. The person who is gay or bisexual by nature recognises him/herself as lying somewhere on the spectrum of human variability, and indeed such people form a remarkably large group within that spectrum. Such people will certainly have difficulty in understanding why they should be forced into a psychological, physical or behavioural pattern determined by the conventional single model of the heterosexual male/female relationship.

The impossibility of conception in gay relationships has been a problem to the Church. Much of the Church, including the Church of Scotland, appears *de facto* to have moved away from what might be called the "functional" justification for marriage: the conception and bearing of children and the provision of a stable environment for their nurture. Childlessness, even by choice, is not today judged to devalue a heterosexual relationship, far less render it disobedient or sinful. The Church no longer appears, as it has in the past, to require every sexual act to be at least potentially capable of procreation. If that has been accepted for the heterosexual situation, it makes it a simple matter to extend such acceptability to gay relationships which are incapable of procreation.

The quality of a gay relationship is as susceptible to the adjudication of its underlying values as a heterosexual relationship. The Christian would probably describe as "good" a heterosexual relationship that is characterised by the principal quality of love, which in turn may be recognised by defining qualities or features such as fidelity, commitment, devotion, caring, forgiveness, patience. Conversely a relationship will be rejected if it is exploitative, unloving or unfaithful. The gay Christian will apply such an evaluation to the quality of a gay relationship: it may similarly be characterised by love or by lack of love.³⁰ So it is possible within the gay Christian community to reject gay prostitution, promiscuity or sex with minors, for example, as exploitative, uncaring or oppressive; in other words, as lacking the necessary quality of love.

Gay Christians believe, therefore, that a relationship which displays the quality of love as understood in an appropriate Christian way is as acceptable an expression of their God-given natures as heterosexual people enjoy in their relationships, and provides a context within which the full range of physical expression of that love is acceptable and appropriate.

²⁸ It must be recognised that some people, while not "by nature" gay, choose sometimes to engage in homosexual activity; others, such as prisoners, find themselves compelled to do so against their will or in order to find sexual release.

²⁹ For a useful discussion on the meaning of "natural" see John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*, Chicago Press 1980, pp. 11-16.

³⁰ D. Forrester, *Homosexuality in the Context of a Christian Understanding of Sexuality*, The Pitlochry Papers, Scottish Homosexual Rights Groups, 1981, pp. 35-36.

10. LIVING WITH DIVERSITY

10:1 The theological and pastoral range within the Church of Scotland is a wide one. It includes conservative evangelicals, for whom the traditional teaching is self-evidently the only honest way to read Scripture, and liberals or radicals who find in Scripture itself possibilities of alternative understanding and practice which challenge received readings.

10:2 What is clear is that in the area of sexual relationships in and around marriage, many Christian people recognise that controversy in this area will not disappear either from the life of this Church or, more widely, from Christian awareness in the late twentieth century.

10:3 Because the debate involves levels of pain and passion, connected with the intimacy and importance of the issues, it is understandable that people should be tempted to get it over and done with: to say, "We have dealt with this; now no more needs to be said".

10:4 We believe that this temptation must be resisted, since to give in to it would be to avoid the wrestling which we trust is part of God's challenge to us at this stage of social and cultural development in contemporary life. We are clear that it oversimplifies the issue to suggest that the only debate is between the Word of God and the Spirit of the Age. Rather, we seek to help the Church to recognise that there are different ways of reading and interpreting that Word: and that in good faith Christians can discern in the signs of the times different signals and messages from God.

10:5 It seems to us that there must be a far more wide-reaching and ongoing conversation within the Church of Scotland, in which we recognise together that the struggle over these questions of marriage and sexuality is itself a gift to the Church and not simply a problem, inviting us to renewed sensitivity and awareness, and offering us the chance to explore what in this context "*reformata et sensu reformanda*" means. If it means that we are able to speak with greater empathy to those who have felt marginalised or ostracised by past Christian pronouncements, if it means that we are less confidently self-righteous, if it means that those in moral perplexity find themselves more confident about trusting Christian pastors or people with their dilemmas: then it has within it evangelical potential.

10:6 For this to happen, it is vital that we are truthful about how we, as Christian people, live by grace; not because we have "right answers" either intellectually or morally, but because in all the fallibility and frailty of our human co-existence we know ourselves as loved and forgiven and accepted people. To re-enact that sense of being loved, forgiven and accepted and made a new creation is the primary witness of the Church, both to its members and to those outside. That does not mean sentimental *laissez-faire* tolerance. It challenges us, and the world we live in, to imitate and manifest and confess the holiness of God. But that holiness is, above all, in the generosity of the Incarnation, which was not dissociation from the fragility, brokenness and sinfulness of the world, but identification with it, to work its recreation from within.

10:7 It is this methodology of identification which suggests the mode of Christian engagement with the challenges of sexual ethics in the present context. Nothing supercilious, superior, patronising or dismissive echoes the mode of God's loving judgement. All our relationships—marriage, friendship, sexual, non-sexual—are challenged by the open, unpossessive, self-emptying generosity of God. It is that generosity which judges us.

10:8 All our relationships are flawed by this standard. Yet the desire and hope and intention, explicit or implicit, to enact such generosity is the deepest vindication of any of our free human relationships. Marriage, at its best, is such an enactment, and its commitment to permanence is vital to its convincingness as an image of the endless solidarity of God and the ground for celebrating it. But we not only have to confess the recurrent failure of marriage as an institution to reflect this evangelical promise: we have to recognise in other relationships glimpses of the desire, the hope and the intention for such generous mutual giving, and cherish those glimpses, and those who have them.

10:9 A Church which can recognise this with truthfulness in its own life; interpret the responsible life-choices of its own adults in the light of God's affirming of inter-personal love, and resist the abuse of persons as exploited objects, is both faithful to the gospel and responsible as witness in a world which abuses sexuality as much as it receives it as gift. That is a major commitment and an urgent vocation. We have wrestled in the preparation of this

report with the diversity of faithfully held Christian perspectives on these issues. We believe that we share a concern to witness to God's gift of marriage as a paradigm of loving relationship, and the most complete and fulfilling setting for the fullness of joy and the shared responsibility of parenting; but we suspect the Church's interest in these matters is sometimes perceived by the world as an interfering curiosity into other people's genital behaviour. To avoid any such impression of trivialisation, we believe that the emphasis of our advocacy of marriage must not be about the legitimacy or illegitimacy of specific sexual acts, but about the virtue of cherishing, mutual, communicative, loving relationships. It is these relationships which show what it means that we live, in the image of God, not as self-sufficient units, but in the giving and receiving of life from one another. Marriage is a God-given paradigm of that life-long exchange of life, and we share the desire to affirm that. What divides us in the Church is whether other relationships involving sexual intimacy may also belong, however imperfectly, to that affirmation of self-giving and receiving mutuality, and may be offered to God in good faith as a response to his gifts of human love and sexuality.

10-10 We believe it would be helpful if the General Assembly were to initiate a process whereby the Church at every level might engage with the questions outlined in this report, and seek authority to produce some resource material for congregations in consultation with the Board of Parish Education and the Board of Social Responsibility. We recognise that the tentativeness of this proposal may disappoint some who find the matter one of black and white absolutes. We judge, however, that the significance of conclusions reached after such a process of willing self-education would be incomparably more durable and helpful than a quick response to any single document.

Appendix of Learning Resources

- Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Faber 1990.
- Susan Dowell, *They Two Shall be One: Monogamy in History and Religion*, Collins/Flame, 1990.
- Methodist Conference Commission on Human Sexuality Report, OSR 1990.
- Robin Smith, *Living in Covenant with God and One Another*, W.C.C., 1990.
- Issues in Human Sexuality*. A Report to the Church of England from the House of Bishops. Church House Publishing, 1991.
- John Boswell, *Christianity, Tolerance and Homosexuality*, Chicago Press, 1980.
- As Man and Woman Made*, United Reformed Church, 1994.
- Keeping Body and Soul Together: Sexuality, Spirituality and Social Justice*, Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., 1991.
- James Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, S.C.M., 1977.
- Robert Morgan and John Barton, *Biblical Interpretation*, O.U.P., 1988.
- Marriage before Marriage?* Grove Ethical Studies No. 69, Bramcore, Grove Books, 1988.
- Venerabilis Splendor*, Vatican, 1993.
- Cohabitation: a Biblical Perspective*, Grove Ethical Studies, No. 84.
- Gary Jenkins and Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume I.
- George Newlands, *Making Christian Decisions*, London and Oxford, 1985.
- J. Neuner and J. Dupuis, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Statements of the Catholic Church*, Collins, 1983.
- P. Coleman, *Christian Attitudes to Homosexuality*, London, 1980.
- Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume III, part 4: The Doctrine of Creation.
- Adrian Thatcher, *Liberating Sex*, S.P.C.K., 1993.

A DISSENT FROM THIS PART OF THE PANEL'S REPORT

As mentioned at several points in the above Report, the issues it raises and the conclusions it reaches will inevitably expose deep divisions within the Church. Although the Working Party, after three years of searching, reading and discussion, reached a unanimity which seemed highly unlikely at the start, the Panel as a whole did not share a common mind. In November 1993 four members expressed concern that traditional standards were not being given sufficient weight in the draft presented to the Panel. The Report was extensively revised in the light of the concerns and criticisms, but when it was discussed again in February of this year six of the fourteen members of the Panel present voted against its transmission to the General Assembly and asked for their dissent to be recorded. They have asked that the following statement of their reasons for dissent should be appended to the Report:

- "1 The Report fails sufficiently to represent the traditional view of Christian marriage and underestimates its continuing potential and relevance in and for the contemporary situation.
- 2 The Report assumes a romantic view of the love of God and the ministry of Christ which we judge to be pastorally inappropriate and theologically inadequate.
- 3 The Report introduces a novel principle of authority for theological reflections—"the life which church members lead now"—which confuses description (the way things are) with prescription (the ways things ought to be) and puts into question the Church of Scotland's acknowledgement of the scriptural Word of God as "the supreme rule of faith and life".
- 4 The Report effectively drains away authority from the Scriptures by diverting the question of what the Bible means and teaches into an endless and drifting "conversation".
- 5 The Report has been too heavily influenced by contemporary trends and by a narrow understanding of what it means to be relevant, with the result that it criticizes the Christian tradition more than it does the dominant fashions of the day.
- 6 The Report virtually ignores the doctrine of creation and thus underplays the significance of the male-female distinction as a structure of creation and divine gift and fails to recognise marriage as a God-ordained institution.
- 7 The Report, in its recommendations concerning same-sex relationships and pre-marital sex, weakens the Church's ability to speak prophetically by implying that these forms of sexual relationships are morally equivalent to marriage, thereby weakening the normative status of marriage and diminishing the significance of the two-parent family.
- 8 The Report places such importance on "acceptance" that it actually inhibits effective pastoral care, insofar as the Report encourages people to remain as they are rather than to seek a radical renewal and transformation of their being through God's grace.
- 9 The Report, in the last resort, fails to give an adequate theological description and commendation of the privileges and responsibilities of the "heroic task" of marriage, namely, its witness to the wisdom of the created order and to the fidelity of God's covenant love."

Rev. Eric Alexander
Rev. Alastair Malcolm
Dr Sheila Sedgwick
Rev. Dr Iain Torrance
Dr Kevin Vanhooser
Mr David Wright

A THEOLOGICAL EXAMINATION OF ANTI-SEMITISM

Remit: The General Assembly instruct the Panel to consider the feasibility of a theological examination of Anti-Semitism.

As the Panel's Working Party reported last year, its initial response to this remit was to approach ACTS, reckoning that a theological examination of anti-semitism was a task which Churches in Scotland could appropriately do together. In February of last year a negative reply was received from ACTS. On 4 March a letter was received from the Board of World Mission and Unity's Christian-Jewish Relations Group, inviting the Panel to send a representative to a conference, planned for October, entitled "Re-reading the New Testament". The conference was advertised as "exploring key issues at the heart of Christian-Jewish relations" and examining "Christian attitudes to Jews as they are influenced by interpretation of Scripture". It was noted that "the Gospels have been used through the ages as a vehicle for anti-Jewish polemic and sentiment". The letter stated that it was hoped the conference would "develop a clearer understanding of the origins of the negative interpretation of Jews and their faith which has marked the history of the Church and . . . discover new means to change anti-Jewish attitudes".

The Working Party decided to lay down their pens once again, inhibited by the fact that this conference presented the strong possibility of a duplication of work. The Working Party were particularly sensitive to the difficulty this can cause because concurrently the Working Party on the Theology of Marriage were discovering that their work was overlapping with the Board of Social Responsibility's work on human sexuality, and throughout most of 1993 it seemed distinctly probable that the Panel and the Board would offer different findings to the General Assembly on certain sexual issues.

Since the conference in October it has become clear that there are theological issues not covered at the conference. The Working Party have therefore now begun serious work. Use will be made of the conference material, experts in the field will be consulted and a report to the General Assembly will be made in 1995.

In the name of the Panel,

A. STEWART TODD, *Convenor.*
JAMES C. STEWART, *Vice-Convenor.*
DAVID M. BECKETT, *Hon. Secretary.*

JOINT COMMISSION ON DOCTRINE— CHURCH OF SCOTLAND/ROMAN CATHOLIC

The Joint Commission on Doctrine met in October. Discussion centred on the first part of the Church of Scotland's Report on Marriage, presented to the 1993 General Assembly. This Report highlighted some new areas which the Joint Commission wishes to take further, in particular an historical survey on the continuity between the late medieval and Reformation periods. Both the biblical and theological sections of the Report on Marriage prompted further discussion on the use of the terms "covenant" and "sacrament". The Joint Commission feels that it will soon be able to present a report which would be written for both churches and would draw on areas of shared interest. The emphasis would be positive, and concentrate on common ground. The Joint Commission believes that when this is done, there will be a natural lead into the doctrines of creation and sexuality.

In addition to this, the Joint Commission wishes to return to deeper issues that have been left unfinished at an earlier part of its discussions, and which would relate to the WARC/RC Report, "Towards a Common Understanding of the Church". The Joint Commission is to explore this possibility and identify the areas of significance at its March meeting.

The Joint Commission noted with sadness the death last summer of the Rev. Eric Pettigrew who had been secretary for many years from the Commission's beginning, and whose clear understanding and deep insight were appreciated by all who worked with him.