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The Lambeth Conference, gender and sexuality

Charlotte Methuen

charlotte.methuen@glasgow.ac.uk

Abstract

On the basis of the Lambeth Conference Resolutions, this article traces discussions of marriage and divorce, polygamy, contraception and sexual relationships, the role of women and homosexuality and same-sex relationships at the Lambeth Conferences from 1888 to 1998. It demonstrates a growing awareness amongst the Anglican bishops of the role of culture in defining approaches to human sexuality and marriage, and of the complex reality of human relationships. As the bishops' understanding changed and developed, they sometimes confirmed, but often amended the responses of Lambeth Conferences.

Keywords

Lambeth Conference – marriage – divorce – polygamy – contraception – sexual relationships – homosexuality – women's ministry

Introduction

Significant tensions have arisen within the Anglican Communion over questions of sexuality, and particularly same-sex relationships, since the 1998 Lambeth Conference. However, it was not until 1888 that a Lambeth Conference – the third – turned to questions of ethical or societal nature, considering temperance, purity and marriage.¹ Since then, Lambeth Conferences have discussed marriage and divorce, polygamy, contraception and sexual relationships, the role of women and, latterly, homosexuality and same-sex attraction. On the basis of the Lambeth Conference resolutions, this article traces those discussions from 1888 to 1998. It will show a growing awareness amongst the Anglican bishops of the role of culture in defining approaches to human sexuality and marriage, and of the complex reality of human relationships.

Marriage and Divorce

Divorce was a concern for the bishops gathered for the 1888 Lambeth Conference. In a resolution which represented the position of Anglican provinces until the late twentieth century, the Bishops agreed:

¹ The resolutions of the Lambeth Conferences [LC] are printed in the conference reports and can also be found online on the webpage of the Anglican Communion Office (<https://www.anglicancommunion.org/structures/instruments-of-communion/lambeth-conference.aspx>). An overview of those pertaining to marriage and sexuality is provided by Andrew Goddard, "Before and After Lambeth I.10: The Lambeth Conference on Sex and Marriage," in Paul Avis and Benjamin Guyer (eds), *The Lambeth Conference: Theology, History, Polity and Purpose* (London: Bloomsbury 2017), 205-233, at 232-233.

That, inasmuch as our Lord's words expressly forbid divorce, except in the case of fornication or adultery, the Christian Church cannot recognise divorce in any other than the excepted case, or give any sanction to the marriage of any person who has been divorced contrary to this law, during the life of the other party.²

The "guilty party" might not re-marry in church during the lifetime of their former spouse. If the "innocent party" re-married, "the clergy should not be instructed to refuse [them] the sacraments or other privileges of the Church."³ In 1908 the bishops reiterated but also sharpened the 1888 resolutions.⁴ By a narrow majority (87 for; 84 against), they determined that even for the innocent party of a divorce wishing to re-marry, "it is undesirable that such a contract should receive the blessing of the Church."⁵

A central concern of the 1920 Lambeth Conference, held in the aftermath of the First World War, was "marriage and sexual morality." Defining marriage as "a life-long and indissoluble union, for better or worse, of one man with one woman, to the exclusion of all others on either side,"⁶ the bishops reiterated that the only ground on which divorce should be granted was adultery, but allowed provincial churches to determine how to minister to divorcees.⁷ The 1930 Lambeth Conference took a stronger line. Concerned with "questions of divorce and with whatever threatens the security of women and the stability of the home," it emphasised the importance of educating children about marriage and sex, in "an atmosphere of simplicity and beauty," and the necessity of marriage preparation.⁸ It reiterated that divorcees might not re-marry in church,⁹ and instructed that an "innocent person" who had re-married and desired admission to Communion must apply to their bishop.¹⁰ These provisions were stricter than those of either 1908 or 1897.

In 1948, the bishops restated their 1930 position.¹¹ Reaffirming marriage as "a life-long union and obligation," they registered their concern at "the great increase in the number of broken marriages and the tragedy of children deprived of true home life", imploring those in unhappy marriages "to remain steadfastly faithful to their marriage vows."¹² The problem, they thought, was "easy divorce in Great Britain, the United States," and they saw "a strong case for the reconsideration by certain states of their divorce laws."¹³ They regarded the preparation of couples for marriage as "a normal pastoral duty in every

² LC 1888, Resolution 4. The permitting of divorce only on the grounds of adultery reflected the legal situation in England and Wales from 1857 until 1937; women had also to prove incest, bigamy or cruelty: see Scot Peterson and Iain McLean, *Legally Married: Love and the Law in the UK and the US* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2013), 105-107.

³ LC 1888, Resolution 4.

⁴ LC 1908, Resolution 39.

⁵ LC 1908, Resolution 40.

⁶ LC 1920, Resolution 67.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ LC 1930, Resolution 12.

⁹ LC 1930, Resolution 11.1.

¹⁰ LC 1930, Resolution 11.2.

¹¹ LC 1948, Resolutions 94, 95, 96.

¹² LC 1948, Resolution 92.

¹³ LC 1948, Resolution 97.

parish,” also commending provisions for marriage guidance.¹⁴ These 1948 resolutions were reaffirmed in 1958.¹⁵ Again commending the importance of marriage preparation, the bishops recommended that in it, “special attention should be given to our Lord’s principle of life-long union as the basis of all true marriage.”¹⁶ Similarly, the 1968 Lambeth Conference defined “monogamous life-long marriage as God’s will for mankind;”¹⁷ it did not allude explicitly to divorce. The 1978 Lambeth Conference highlighted “the Christian ideals of faithfulness and chastity both within and outside marriage,”¹⁸ and the need for “ministries of compassionate support to those suffering from brokenness within marriage and family relationships.”¹⁹

Questions of remarriage after divorce have not been dealt with by any Lambeth Conference since 1948. Rather, it has been left to each province to determine how to deal with the re-marriage of divorcees in church, the admission of re-married divorcees to communion and the ordination of those divorced and remarried with a partner still living.²⁰

Marriage, Polygamy and Culture

The 1920 Lambeth Conference had defined marriage as “a life-long and indissoluble union, for better or worse, of one man with one woman, to the exclusion of all others on either side.”²¹ Whilst the emphasis on marriage as an “indissoluble union” articulated the bishops’ concerns about divorce, the focus on marriage as “one man with one woman” reflected their concerns about polygamy. The 1888 Lambeth Conference counselled that “persons living in polygamy be not admitted to baptism,” although they could enter Christian instruction,²² and “the wives of polygamists” could “be admitted in some cases to baptism,” subject to local decision.²³ Polygamy was not mentioned again explicitly in a Lambeth Conference Resolution until 1958, although Andrew Goddard observes that concerns about it shaped Resolution 39 of the 1920 Lambeth Conference, which called for “the marriage law of the Church” to be consistently understood and administered across the Anglican Communion,²⁴ and commended the conference’s report, on “Missionary Problems”. This reiterated the prohibition on baptizing polygamists, but also required that polygamous men seeking baptism must make provision for any wives from whom they had separated.²⁵

¹⁴ LC 1948, Resolution 93.

¹⁵ LC 1958, Resolution 119.

¹⁶ LC 1958, Resolution 114.

¹⁷ LC 1958, Resolution 23.

¹⁸ LC 1978, Resolution 10.

¹⁹ LC 1978, Resolution 10.2.b.

²⁰ In the Church of England the restriction on the ordination of a divorced person with a partner still living was lifted in the late 1980s. Divorced and remarried postulants for ordination undergo an investigation as to the circumstances of the divorce. Divorcees who wish to re-marry must generally obtain the permission of their bishop.

²¹ LC 1920, Resolution 67.

²² LC 1888, Resolution 5.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ LC 1920, Resolution 39.

²⁵ Goddard, “Before and After Lambeth I.10,” 214, citing *Conference of Bishops of the Anglican Communion holden at Lambeth Palace, July 5 to August 7 1920* (London: SPCK 1920), 89.

The 1958 Lambeth Conference recognised that the “introduction of monogamy into societies that practice polygamy involves a social and economic revolution” and that this posed real challenges to the church.²⁶ In particular, “the problem of polygamy is bound up with the limitations of opportunities for women in society.”²⁷ The bishops also reaffirmed that “monogamy is the divine will, testified by the teaching of Christ himself, ... true for every race of men.”²⁸ In 1968 the bishops reiterated that polygamy “poses one of the sharpest conflicts between the faith and particular cultures.”²⁹ Goddard notes that as originally drafted, this resolution would have acknowledged polygamy as “a fact in some countries” pointing to the “great suffering and great disruption” caused by the “abrupt termination” of polygamous marriages; however, disagreements amongst the African bishops led to the removal of this clause.³⁰

The 1988 Lambeth Conference, although it reiterated that monogamy was “God’s plan” and “the ideal relationship of love between husband and wife”, nonetheless recommended “that a polygamist who responds to the Gospel and wishes to join the Anglican Church may be baptized and confirmed with his believing wives and children,” provided that he promised not to marry again as long as any of his wives were alive, and that his reception had the consent of the local congregation.³¹ Moreover, he “shall not be compelled to put away any of his wives, on account of the social deprivation they would suffer.”³² The general restriction on the baptism of men in polygamous marriages had been lifted, and the requirement that a man might remain with only one of his wives removed.

The 1988 resolution witnesses to the bishops’ growing awareness of the importance of culture, as evidenced in the recognition that “their culture is the context in which people find their identity.”³³ The bishops affirmed further “that God’s love extends to people of every culture and that the Gospel judges every culture according to the Gospel’s own criteria of truth, challenging some aspects of culture while endorsing and transforming others for the benefit of the Church and society.”³⁴ Although the question of which aspects were to be challenged and which endorsed was left open, this challenged the implicit assumption that Western cultural norms equated to Christian culture. Earlier discussions of polygamy had been undertaken by a conference constituted predominantly by white bishops born in Britain or the USA. By 1988, the majority of the bishops attending the Lambeth Conference had been born in the context and culture in which they ministered.

²⁶ LC 1958, Resolution 120.b.

²⁷ LC 1958, Resolution 120.d.

²⁸ LC 1958, Resolution 120.a.

²⁹ LC 1958, Resolution 23.

³⁰ Goddard, “Before and After Lambeth I.10,” 215, citing James Beasley Simpson and Edward M. Story, *The Long Shadows of Lambeth X: a critical, eye-witness account of the tenth decennial conference of 462 bishops of the Anglican Communion* (New York: McGraw-Hill 1969), 142-143.

³¹ LC 1988, Resolution 26.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ LC 1988, Resolution 22.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Contraception and attitudes towards sexual intercourse

"The artificial restriction of the family"³⁵ represents another area where later Lambeth Conferences reversed earlier decisions. The 1908 Lambeth Conference judged such measures to be "demoralising to character and hostile to national welfare,"³⁶ and decried "deliberate tampering with nascent life" as "repugnant to Christian morality."³⁷ In 1920 the bishops reiterated their concern about "the use of unnatural means for the avoidance of conception," alluding to "the grave dangers – physical, moral and religious – thereby incurred."³⁸ Contraception, they thought, mitigated against the "primary purpose" of marriage, "the continuation of the race through the gift and heritage of children," and also encouraged "the deliberate cultivation of sexual union as an end in itself."³⁹ The prevalence of venereal disease also disquieted the bishops, but they rejected the use of "so-called prophylactics" to combat it, "since these cannot but be regarded as an invitation to vice."⁴⁰ In addition, the bishops encouraged campaigns against "indecent literature, suggestive plays and films, the open or secret sale of contraceptives, and the continued existence of brothels."⁴¹ For both sexes, the "unchangeable Christian standard," they stated, was "a pure and chaste life before and after marriage."⁴²

By the time of the 1930 Lambeth Conference, however, the bishops' attitudes towards contraception had begun to change.⁴³ Although they still held that "primary purpose for which marriage exists is the procreation of children,"⁴⁴ and viewed "the duty of parenthood as the glory of married life,"⁴⁵ the bishops affirmed that "sexual instinct is a holy thing implanted by God in human nature," finding "that intercourse between husband and wife as the consummation of marriage has a value of its own within that sacrament, and that thereby married love is enhanced and its character strengthened."⁴⁶ The bishops now recognised that there might exist a "clearly felt moral obligation to limit or avoid parenthood;"⁴⁷ while their preferred option was abstinence, they conceded that "other methods may be used."⁴⁸ Notwithstanding their affirmation of "sexual instinct", however, the bishops condemned the use of contraception "from motives of selfishness, luxury, or mere convenience."⁴⁹

In 1958, the bishops affirmed marriage as "a vocation to holiness, through which men and women share in the love and creative purpose of God," although they maintained that "sexual love is not an end in itself nor a means to self-gratification, and ... self-discipline and

³⁵ LC 1908, Resolution 41.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ LC 1908, Resolution 42. This provision referred also to abortion.

³⁸ LC 1920, Resolution 68.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ LC 1920, Resolution 69.

⁴¹ LC 1920, Resolution 70.

⁴² LC 1920, Resolution 66.

⁴³ For the reasons for this, see the article by Peter Sedgwick in this issue.

⁴⁴ LC 1930, Resolution 13.

⁴⁵ LC 1930, Resolution 14.

⁴⁶ LC 1930, Resolution 13.

⁴⁷ LC 1930, Resolution 15.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid. Resolution 15 was passed with 193 votes for and 67 against.

restraint are essential conditions of the freedom of marriage and family planning.”⁵⁰ Family planning was viewed as “positive choice before God,” taking account of “the resources and abilities of the family as well as a thoughtful consideration of the varying population needs and problems of society and the claims of future generations.”⁵¹ The language of “artificial restriction of the family” had given way to “responsible parenthood,” also the title of the 1968 resolution which took issue with *Humanae vitae*. The Anglican bishops found themselves unable to agree with Pope Paul VI “that all methods of conception control other than abstinence from sexual intercourse or its confinement to periods of infecundity are contrary to the ‘order established by God’.”⁵² The 1968 Lambeth Conference thus rejected precisely the position taken by the 1908 and 1920 Conferences.

Thereafter, the Anglican bishops’ ethical priorities shifted away from contraception. The 1978 Lambeth Conference highlighted “the sacredness of all human life, the moral issues inherent in clinical abortion, and the possible implications of genetic engineering.”⁵³ In 1988 the bishops acknowledged “the gap between traditional Christian teaching on pre-marital sex, and the life-styles being adopted by many people today,” calling for “a caring and pastoral attitude,” whilst also reaffirming “the traditional biblical teaching that sexual intercourse is an act of total commitment which belongs properly within a permanent married relationship.”⁵⁴ They also emphasised “traditional biblical teaching on the value of the human person who, being made in the image of God, is neither to be exploited nor abused,” raising concerns about “the frequency of domestic violence and the sexual abuse of children.”⁵⁵ In addition, the bishops addressed the challenge of HIV/AIDS, calling for education about both cause and prevention, “in a loving and non-judgemental spirit towards those who suffer.”⁵⁶ By 1988, the use of condoms – prophylactics – had been recognised as an effective way of preventing the transmission of HIV/AIDS, so their use was implicit to this recommendation. The Lambeth Conference had moved far from its firm opposition to contraception eighty years earlier.

Women, marriage and the family

Bound up with successive Lambeth Conferences’ considerations of marriage was their understanding of the role of women in marriage and in society. When in 1908, the bishops called on “all right-thinking and clean-living men and women” to cooperate “in defence of the family life and the social order,”⁵⁷ they recommended that the “influence of all good women in all ranks of life” should be “specially applied” to remedy the “terrible evils” of divorce.⁵⁸ By 1948, the bishops, whilst “recognising that marriage and motherhood remain the normal vocation of women,” also acknowledged and welcomed “the great contributions

⁵⁰ LC 1958, Resolution 113.

⁵¹ LC 1958, Resolution 115.

⁵² LC 1968, Resolution 22.

⁵³ Lambeth Conference 1978, Resolution 10.2.c.

⁵⁴ LC 1988, Resolution 34.3.

⁵⁵ LC 1988, Resolution 26.

⁵⁶ LC 1988, Resolution 29.

⁵⁷ LC 1908, Resolution 37.

⁵⁸ LC 1908, Resolution 38.

now being made by women in many walks of life," urging the importance of vocational training for women as well as men.⁵⁹ The 1958 conference commended (but did not define) "the right fullness and balance of the relationship between men and women" in marriage.⁶⁰ By 1998 the bishops could affirm their rejoicing "at the emerging consensus that racism, inequality between men and women, global economic injustice and the degradation of the earth's ecology are incompatible with the Christian faith."⁶¹

The changing role of women in the Anglican ministry witnesses to shifts in the understanding of women's role that are only hinted at in these resolutions. In 1897 the Lambeth Conference commended the revival of "brotherhoods and sisterhoods and of the office of deaconess."⁶² The 1920 Lambeth Conference took an important step towards equality by resolving that "women should be admitted to those councils of the Church to which laymen are admitted, and on equal terms."⁶³ The deaconess order, however, was "for women the one and only order of the ministry which has the stamp of apostolic approval,"⁶⁴ although women were also encouraged to enter the mission field.⁶⁵ Deaconesses provided "a ministry of succour, bodily and spiritual, especially to women;"⁶⁶ moreover (notwithstanding Paul's exhortations to female silence⁶⁷) they were permitted to undertake some liturgical functions, and "under licence of the bishop" might "instruct and exhort" congregations.⁶⁸ In 1930, the bishops reiterated these provisions,⁶⁹ again asserting the deaconess order to be "for women the one and only order of the ministry,"⁷⁰ but allowing also that "women of special qualifications" might be commissioned "to speak at other than the regular services, or to conduct retreats, or to give spiritual counsel."⁷¹ This position was confirmed by the 1948 Lambeth Conference in response to the ordination of deaconess Florence Li Tim Oi to the priesthood by Bishop Ronald Hall in Hong Kong in 1944 to minister to Anglicans cut off by the Second World War.⁷² In 1958, the Lambeth Conference urged "that that fuller use should be made of trained and qualified women."⁷³ The 1968 Lambeth Conference recommended

⁵⁹ LC 1948, Resolution 48.

⁶⁰ LC 1958, Resolution 113.

⁶¹ LC 1998, Resolution IV.5.b.

⁶² LC 1897, Resolution 11.

⁶³ LC 1920, Resolution 46.

⁶⁴ LC 1920, Resolution 48.

⁶⁵ LC 1920, Resolution 32.

⁶⁶ LC 1920, Resolution 49.

⁶⁷ The report "The position of women in the councils and ministrations of the Church" determined Paul's assertion of "the spiritual equality of men and women" so that "difference of function between man and woman in the Church, as in the world, and the relative subordination of the woman in no way imply an inferiority of woman in regard to man." Although Paul's instructions embodied "an abiding principle," they were "relative to the time and to the place which he actually had in mind." *Conference of Bishops of the Anglican Communion... 1920*, 97-98.

⁶⁸ LC 1920, Resolution 52.

⁶⁹ LC 1930, Resolution 70.

⁷⁰ LC 1930, Resolution 67.

⁷¹ LC 1930, Resolution 71.

⁷² See Florence Li Tim Oi, *Much beloved daughter* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd 1985).

⁷³ LC 1958, Resolution 93.

the creation of a permanent diaconate, open to both men and women,⁷⁴ with canonical provision for “duly qualified women” to preach, baptize and share in the conduct of worship.⁷⁵ By 1978, women had been ordained to the priesthood in four provinces; a further eight provinces were preparing to follow suit and there were discussions about the consecration of women as bishops.⁷⁶ In February 1989 Barbara Harris was elected suffragan bishop of Massachusetts; eleven female bishops attended the 1998 Lambeth Conference. The century from 1897 to 1998 had witnessed a fundamental change of attitude towards the role of women in church and society, and the Lambeth Conference, although recognising that these developments had “caused distress and pain to many on both sides,”⁷⁷ had found ways to accommodate them.

Homosexuality and same-sex relationships

The first mention of homosexuality in a Lambeth Conference resolution occurred in 1978:

While we reaffirm heterosexuality as the scriptural norm, we recognise the need for deep and dispassionate study of the question of homosexuality, which would take seriously both the teaching of Scripture and the results of scientific and medical research. The Church, recognising the need for pastoral concern for those who are homosexual, encourages dialogue with them.⁷⁸

In 1988 a resolution headed “Human Rights for Those of Homosexual Orientation” recommended that the study of homosexuality should “take account of biological, genetic and psychological research being undertaken by other agencies, and the socio-cultural factors that lead to the different attitudes in the provinces of our Communion.”⁷⁹ Such factors included the legacy of British colonialism: Enze Han and Joseph O’Mahoney observe that “former British colonies are much more likely to have laws that criminalize homosexual conduct than other former colonies or other states in general.”⁸⁰ They included also the British “Local Government Act” of 1988 which prohibited “the intentional promotion of homosexuality” by local authorities.⁸¹ In Britain, however, rapid change ensued. In England and Wales the age of consent for male same-sex acts was reduced to 18 in 1996, and to 16 in 1999 (in line with the age of consent for heterosexuals); civil partnerships were introduced in 2004; discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation was outlawed by the 2010 Equality

⁷⁴ LC 1968, Resolution 32.

⁷⁵ LC 1968, Resolution 38.

⁷⁶ LC 1978, Resolutions 21 and 22.

⁷⁷ LC 1978, Resolution 21.

⁷⁸ LC 1978, Resolution 10.3.

⁷⁹ LC 1988, Resolution 64.

⁸⁰ Enze Han and Joseph O’Mahoney, “British colonialism and the criminalization of homosexuality,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 27 (2014), 268-288, at 269.

⁸¹ See Joe Moran, “Childhood Sexuality and Education: The Case of Section 28,” *Sexualities* 4 (2001), 73-89.

Act, and same-sex marriage was legalised in 2013.⁸² Resolution I.10 was passed at the 1998 Lambeth Conference as these changes were in train. It upheld “faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union,” condemned “homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture,” and countenanced neither the “legitimising or blessing of same sex unions nor ordaining those involved in same gender unions.” At the same time it committed the Communion to “listen to the experience of homosexual persons,” and called “on all our people to minister pastorally and sensitively to all irrespective of sexual orientation and to condemn irrational fear of homosexuals, violence within marriage and any trivialisation and commercialisation of sex.”⁸³ The 1998 Lambeth Conference also requested “continuing work to identify, study and come to a common mind concerning ethical issues where contention threatens to divide the Anglican Communion.”⁸⁴ Since 1998, tensions around the ordination of those living in same-sex partnerships, and particularly their consecration of bishops, have threatened to split the Anglican Communion, and deep and divisive debates about appropriate attitudes homosexuality and those living in same-sex relationships continue.⁸⁵

Conclusion

Surveying the Lambeth Conferences’ resolutions relating to marriage, gender and sexuality reveals the ways in which Anglican bishops’ attitudes have changed since they first addressed divorce and polygamy in 1897. The bishops’ growing awareness of the impact of culture on perceptions of marriages and sexuality reflects the increasing complexity of the Anglican Communion: Anglican bishops are no longer a mono-culture of white western men.⁸⁶ The view of the Lambeth Conference has not proved static; rather, the bishops have generally proved responsive to the same trends which were shaping the secular laws of the world in which they lived.⁸⁷ Discerning how the gospel may speak into the lives of contemporary people has been and will always remain a living process, vital if the gospel is to have a transformative impact in the present moment. It is to be hoped that future Lambeth Conferences will continue to rise to the prophetic challenge of interpreting the gospel to the world.

⁸² See Andrew Gilbert, *British Conservatism and the Legal Regulation of Intimate Relationships* (London: Hart Publishing 2018).

⁸³ LC 1998, Resolution I.10.

⁸⁴ LC 1998, Resolution IV.5.c.

⁸⁵ See Stephen Bates, *A church at war: Anglicans and homosexuality* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004); Andrew Goddard, “Sexuality and Communion,” in: Mark Chapman, Sathianathan Clarke, and Martyn Percy (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Anglican Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015), 413-426.

⁸⁶ See John L Kater Jr., “Faithful church, plural world: Diversity at Lambeth 1998,” *Anglican Theological Review* 81 (1999), 235-267.

⁸⁷ There are marked parallels to the developments identified by Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800* (London: Routledge, 4th edition 2017).