

Submission to Human Sexuality Working Group

Adrian Vincent, 31 May 2012

The Church of England's House of Bishops has established a working group to advise it on taking forward the listening process on human sexuality, following a resolution of the 1998 Lambeth Conference. In February, the working group invited submissions, to be received by 31 May, for consideration in its work to help the House of Bishops to produce a consultation document.

My submission is attached.

**Submission from Adrian Vincent to the Church of England group
on human sexuality established by the House of Bishops
31 May 2012**

Introduction

I am an elected lay member of the General Synod. I am responding to the announcement on the Church of England website of 23 February 2012:

“The group chaired by Sir Joseph Pilling to advise the House of Bishops on the Church of England's approach to human sexuality has invited submissions. Written submissions can be sent, to arrive by 31 May, to: Sexuality Working Group, c/o Central Secretariat, Church House, Gt Smith Street, London SW1P 3AZ or sexualityworkinggroup@churchofengland.org. The group will also invite oral evidence at a later stage.

The House of Bishops announced on 1 July, 2011, that it intended to draw together material from the listening process undertaken within the Church of England over recent years in the light of the 1998 Lambeth Conference resolution. It also committed itself to offering proposals on how the continuing discussion within the Church of England about these matters might best be shaped in the light of the listening process. The task of Sir Joseph's group, announced last month, is to help the House discharge its commitment to produce a consultation document.”

How I have personally responded to the listening process launched by the 1998 Lambeth Conference

For the last year and a half I have been attending some of the meetings of a regional group of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement (LGCM) and also some of the events organised by Changing Attitude. Talks I have listened to at these events include from: the Revd James Alison the Roman Catholic theologian (Annex 1); the Revd Bob Callaghan of Inclusive Church (Annex 2); the Revd Sharon Ferguson of LGCM; and Jeremy Marks of Courage UK (Annex 3 - Mr Marks is someone I would recommend the Working Group invite to receive oral evidence from).

Prior to attending the LGCM meetings I emailed the organiser to seek permission to attend, explaining that I hold a traditional interpretation of the Bible on sexual ethics, that sex outside of marriage between a man and a woman is wrong, but that I took seriously the 1998 Lambeth Conference Resolution statement "We commit ourselves to listen to the experience of homosexual persons". I said that the purpose of my attending would be to meet people and to listen, not to promote my own opinions. I received the kind reply that I would be welcome to attend and that I should understand that the purpose of the meetings was to be a "safe space" for homosexual people and all who do not come into the category of "heterosexual".

In accordance with the safe space purpose of those meetings I have not reported on anything that any attendee said at those meetings. I have only referred to statements made by the main speakers, whose statements are already in print in their many articles and books. What I do wish to record is the warm and genuine welcome that I have received from all of the 10 – 20 people who were at the LGCM regional group that I attended, the atmosphere is relaxed, caring, gentle and genuine.

The biggest challenge to me in respect of my attempts to engage in the listening process came when I read this comment by Bren Marks in the book by Jeremy Marks¹:

“Someone said to me recently, ‘I want to be informed but not influenced by your arguments?’ What an odd statement. I realised that it was an expression of fear – clever, but fearful none the less. This person wanted to convey to us that he had listened but he was not prepared to change his mind, and if that’s not prejudice, I’m not Bren Marks.”

My listening and reading has not so far fundamentally changed my mind on this subject. Certainly I haven’t listened enough. Perhaps I have been simply going through the motions so that I can ‘tick the box’ of having listened. On the other hand, it is also possible that, irrespective of my inadequate listening, the traditional understanding that the Bible teaches that sexual intercourse should only take place within heterosexual marriage remains the correct understanding.

In what follows I sketch out some areas that the forthcoming consultation should address.

1.) The need to break down the barriers of mutual suspicion

In 2010 I attended the residential conference of the conservative evangelical group, Reform.² One of the leaders of Reform described Reform as a loose coalition of volunteer churches and individuals, which was in contrast to the highly organised and powerful lobby groups such as LGCM, Changing Attitude and Inclusive Church. Last year I attended an LGCM meeting where the speaker said that LGCM, Changing Attitude and Inclusive Church were a loose coalition of volunteer churches and individuals, which was in contrast to the highly organised and powerful lobby groups such as Reform and Anglican Mainstream. This rather ironic example illustrates the mutual suspicion that can only be broken down by the leaders and members of the ‘opposing’ organisations meeting together and getting to know one another.

In another illustration of mutual suspicion, on one side, Ben Summerskill, Chief Executive of Stonewall has written of the suspicion of the Evangelical Alliance towards them:³

“...meeting someone from the Evangelical Alliance. He was clearly of the view that every time we’ve come back from the House of Lords after securing a change in the law, for example to do with civil partnerships or employment rights, we were saying ‘Ha ha, that’s one more nail in the coffin for Christianity.’ When one of our team told him that, no, in fact we were instead thinking things like ‘isn’t it nice that I won’t now be able to be sacked for being gay’, I don’t think it had crossed the guy’s mind that this might have been our attitude.”

On the other side, a paper on the LGCM website reveals their suspicion of the Evangelical Alliance in their description of its former Director, Joel Edwards, as “an enemy”.⁴

¹ Jeremy Marks, “Exchanging the truth of God for a lie: One man’s spiritual journey to find the truth about homosexuality and same-sex partnerships”, Courage UK, Second edn 2009, page 99.

² I am not a member of Reform, but was given kind permission to attend the Conference. I wrote a brief report at the time, which is available on my website: <http://www.adrianvincent.org.uk/reformconference.html>

³ “All God’s Children: the magazine of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement”, February 2012, page 15.

I doubt that the different sides meeting together will result in any change of opinion on sexual ethics, it should help in seeing those Christians on the 'other side' of the debate, more as sincere Christian people, and less as opponents.

I think that the House of Bishops working group should also go beyond the terms of the 1998 Lambeth Conference resolution. Not only should traditionalists listen to the views and experiences of gay Christians and their call to reinterpret Scripture; gay Christians should also seek to listen to the views and experiences of traditionalist Christians and their call to uphold the traditional interpretation of Scripture. I recognise that such listening is a 'bigger ask' for gay Christians, because however gently, academically and non-personally a conservative evangelical might put their views, it is hard for a gay Christian not to receive it as a personal criticism, because of the implications such arguments might carry for their personal lives.

2.) The need for a fresh look at the 'nature vs. nurture' argument

Some Christians argue that homosexual orientation is not something that is God-given (nature), but that it is something that is down to a person's environment (nurture). Or, even if they accept that people are born gay, they argue that this is not God-given, but a consequence of the Fall (Genesis 3) where creation was disordered. Any of those arguments are extremely offensive to gay people.

I think that a middle way and possibly a fresh approach is to return to the doctrine in the Book of Common Prayer "original sin...is the fault and corruption of the Nature of every man". It could therefore be argued that all people, heterosexual and homosexual equally have a disordered nature. It is Jesus' death and resurrection, our receiving of baptism and our receiving of the Holy Spirit that is the start of a process of recreation that will only be completed once we get to heaven.

Wes Hill, an evangelical gay Christian, writes that the nature vs. nurture argument is the wrong focus:⁵

"the Christian story is that we are both created good by God, made in the image of God, and yet we are fallen. ...things which feel natural and which feel like they're written into my DNA, I can't simply interpret as evidence of creation. I have to also hold together a theology of the fall. So I would question whether we can reliably take what we feel and experience as a direct indicator of what God intends for us. [...] We have already tasted the powers of the age to come, as the letter to the Hebrews says, and yet we are still, as Paul says, groaning and yearning for a redemption that we don't fully have. I think that means we should be hopeful about the foretaste of the redemption we have now, and yet we should also have a kind of eschatological reserve, recognising that the fullness of our healing, the fullness of our blessing, is not yet for use until we're with Christ in the new creation."

⁴ "It is intolerable that for LGBT people seeking justice through the equality commission, they now have to confront an enemy within the body, and one such as Joel Edwards who has a long history of agitating against the full inclusion of the LGBT community under equality law", page 3 of "Joel Edwards and The Evangelical Alliance: Opponents of human rights for lesbian and gay people" <http://www.lgcm.org.uk/resources/>

⁵ In an article in the Oak Hill "Commentary" magazine, Winter 2011/12 issue.

3.) The need for further consideration of the argument from experience

Annex 3 of this submission records the powerful testimony of Jeremy Marks of Courage UK. He gives first-hand evidence that sincere and prayerful attempts by gay Christians to change their orientation, or to remain celibate, causes damage to the individual's faith and mental health; whereas committed same-sex sexual relationships have strengthened faith and mental health.

This testimony must be taken seriously, however there is a question whether evidence from experience should 'trump' other arguments, and if the correct interpretation of Scripture pointed to a different conclusion, Scripture should be the supreme authority. Of course, the evidence from experience rightly leads us to re-examine Scripture and exposes previously biased interpretations based upon our presuppositions, assumptions and prejudices.

A rather extreme example, might illustrate why experience should not trump Scripture. I know someone who had been a Christian but for some years was plagued with doubts and internal struggles. He then turned his back on the Christian faith and reported how liberated he felt having made that decision. That first-hand testimony must be taken seriously, but it does not prove that Christianity is wrong. Similarly, it can be argued that first hand testimony of the blessing of covenanted same-sex sexual relationships does not prove that the traditional interpretation of Scripture is wrong.

4.) The need for a fresh look at whether the demand by heterosexual Christians of gay Christians for celibacy is hypocritical

The Osborne Report acknowledged:⁶

“...the experience of an unchosen celibacy is a heavy burden which feels at times like a denial of important parts of their humanity. For such people, the Christian tradition seems like an oppressive weight, not a liberty.”

Roy Clements wrote:⁷

“I dread the possibility of going through my entire life as a single man. No doubt I could survive, as many Christians do, a period of temporary singleness, provided there was hope that I might find a partner one day. But much of my struggle comes from the thought that my lack of someone to love and be loved by must be lifelong. [...] The key difference between being a gay Christian and a straight one is that the latter is allowed to pursue the goal of finding a life-partner, whereas the former is not. [...] However, as my journey has progressed I have discovered there is a second option. It is to take the traditional Christian values to which I am inescapably committed, such as love, integrity and faithfulness, and apply them to my life as a gay man. In other words, to treat my gay sexual orientation as something which can be sanctified by Christ.”

⁶ “Report to the House of Bishops on Homosexuality”, undated, page 67, available on *The Church Times* website to subscribers.

⁷ “A Personal Journey: the following testimony comes from a gay evangelical Christian”, Roy Clements <http://www.courage.org.uk/articles/article.asp?id=145>

Evangelicals will often counter such statements by pointing out that we should expect the Christian life to involve suffering; Jesus called us to take up our cross every day, and also not to take the broad easy path, but the narrow difficult path.

Jeremy Marks is aware of and responds to such arguments:⁸

“when gay people have the courage to embrace their sexuality as a gift from God and learn to live and love well as gay Christians, they are seen as taking the easy option and settling for the *broad road to destruction* (Matt. 7:13)”

“I have learned that Jesus’ command to *take up your cross* (Matthew 10:38-39) is fundamentally a challenge to egotistical posturing, calling us to repent of the foolish agendas that we often promote in order to exercise control over our own lives and the lives of others. Whilst undeniably the Christian life may involve intense suffering at times, his challenge has little if anything to do with the need to suffer purely for the sake of it. Such a discipline is often imposed by the kind of religion that never succeeds in making anyone truly good. As Paul points out: [...] (Colossians 2:20-23)”

It is easy to trade Bible verses for our own purposes in this debate. However, I think we need to take seriously passages such as Romans 7, where Saint Paul, a holy a completely committed Christian, writes of his constant internal struggles. Perhaps we should not be surprised if our struggles are life-long.

I think it can also be said that a burden on gay Christians to remain celibate, which feels like an impossible burden is not unique. Heterosexual Christians are also placed with a seemingly impossible burden of their own. Jesus said “everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:28). The standard expected by Jesus of heterosexual Christians never to entertain a lustful thought seems like an impossible task to heterosexuals. However, this does not mean that the response should be to give up the struggle or reinterpret the Bible to remove the struggle.

Jeremy Marks writes:⁹

“It is easy for heterosexual married pastors to demand a life of celibacy as the biblical answer for homosexual people. They have little experience of the years of aching loneliness we have known. [...] They could revise their interpretation of Scripture in relation to birth control, divorce and re-marriage- in spite of the fact that birth control interferes with nature and re-marriage for divorced people is categorically prohibited in Scripture (if the texts are taken at face value).”

The criticism of inconsistency is a powerful argument that has to be taken seriously by evangelical Christians. However, the fact that some have changed their approach in response to pastoral needs does not of itself mean that the approach must similarly be changed in this area. For example, it could be argued that the changes mentioned might not have been correct, and there remain Christians who hold the traditional view on all these areas. For example, the Roman Catholic Church has maintained its opposition to birth control and re-marriage for divorced people so cannot be criticised for inconsistency.

⁸ Jeremy Marks, “Exchanging the truth of God for a lie: One man’s spiritual journey to find the truth about homosexuality and same-sex partnerships”, Courage UK, Second edn 2009, pages 48 and 61.

⁹ as above, pages 76-77.

5.) The need to look at more than just the usual Scriptural passages

The scriptural debate hitherto seems to have been in two areas:

a.) Debate about the interpretation of a very small number of Bible verses that refer to homosexual sex (e.g. Romans 1: 18-32; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 1 Timothy 1:8-11)

The Revd Sharon Ferguson writes:¹⁰

“Only a small number of passages in the entire Bible reference same-sex sexual activity. Obviously this topic was not of great concern to the biblical writers. Yet these verses have been used to justify hatred, condemnation and exclusion of God’s lgbt (lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans) children.”

Firstly this quotation is an example of the unnecessarily polarised debate. I am not aware of any conservative evangelicals who say LGBT people should be ‘hated, condemned and excluded’. There will always be tiny minority who say something outrageous, but to focus on that gives the wrong impression that that is the view of all traditionalists and unfairly makes it much easier to dismiss them and their arguments.

Secondly, an ‘argument from silence’ is always risky. For example, in relation to other subjects, the argument from silence is taken as evidence of the Bible’s condemnation of the topic. For example, in his commentary on 2 Samuel 11, John Goldingay writes: “...the Old Testament’s failure to mention abortion and the Torah’s failure to prohibit it suggests it wasn’t within the framework of thinking for Israelites even when pregnancies were totally unwelcome.”¹¹

Thirdly, the number of passages that have been endlessly focussed on are a fraction of what should be studied in this area. For example, the Greek word-group *porneia* occurs 55 times in the New Testament. It is generally translated as “fornication” or “sexual immorality”, and according to a theological dictionary “can describe various extra-marital sexual modes of behaviour”¹² Therefore, we have at least 55 New Testament passages to examine.

b.) The argument that the whole sweep of Scripture is about loving one another, and we should judge the rightness of relationships by their fruits.

Roy Clements, for example, writes¹³

“A good case, for instance, could be made for seeking a positive ethic for homosexuality within the Bible’s general approval for the virtue of “covenant-love”. Jesus himself pointed us in this direction when he rejected the casuistic legalism of the Pharisees and insisted instead that if biblical law is to be correctly applied, it must be interpreted within the paradigm of the two great “love” commands. I can find no place in Scripture where an expression of covenant-love is disparaged, still less condemned. It is the virtue of covenant-love which made David’s union with

¹⁰ <http://mccnorthlondon.org.uk/resources/clobber-passages/>

¹¹ John Goldingay, *1 and 2 Samuel for Everyone*, SPCK, 2001, p.141.

¹² Colin Brown (Ed.) “New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology” Volume 1, Paternoster Press, Revised ed. 1986, page 497.

¹³ “Cast Out”, Roy Clements, April 2002, <http://www.courage.org.uk/articles/article.asp?id=139>

Bathsheba reprehensible, and his friendship with Jonathan beautiful. It was covenant-love which bound Ruth to Naomi, as well as to Boaz. Marriage is one example of covenant-love, but same-sex friendships can display that love too.”

Similarly, *The Church Times* of 4 May 2012 quotes a letter from the Bishop of Norwich to his clergy: “It is surely to the benefit of the whole of our society if gay people live in faithful, stable and publicly recognised relationships.”

However, whilst a covenanted sexual same-sex partnership is of course preferable to a promiscuous or abusive relationship, gay or heterosexual, that does not mean that it is preferable to the traditional Scriptural interpretation of sex to be only within heterosexual marriage and celibacy outside of marriage.

Secondly, whilst the David-Jonathan loving covenant of 1 Samuel 18:3-4 might be said to be akin to a civil partnerships, it could not be used as a precedent for a gay sexual relationship or gay marriage, because whilst David is still in that covenant with Jonathan he marries Saul’s daughter Michal, and the covenant with Jonathan continues.

Thirdly, doing something with the right intention and out of love for God does not necessarily make it right. An extreme example to make the point is 2 Samuel 6:6-7 where out holy motives to serve God, Uzzah seeks to steady the ark of the covenant to save it from damage and is struck down by God for breaching the laws of holiness.

c.) The argument that just as the Holy Spirit lead to doctrinal change within the time of the New Testament, it can do the same today

Some make the point that the Bible appears not to challenge the situation of slavery as it existed at that time, but that the Holy Spirit later led Christians to campaign against the evils of slavery. In the same way, the Bible appears not to support homosexuality, but the Holy Spirit has later shown us that being gay is a gift from God in creation.

This is the debate about authority and where you draw the line in the Church changing doctrine. I think that the line should be drawn that, whilst the Church can re-interpret the Bible and be led into new understandings, we do not have authority to overturn what the Bible says. So, for example, as regards slavery, the Bible did not say that slavery was a good system. Therefore we are free to oppose it. As regards sex outside of heterosexual marriage, if the Bible specifically opposes it in numerous places we are consequently not free to overturn it.

6.) The need to address the concern that more talking and working groups are not necessarily the answer.

On 26 April 2012, I attended the evening meeting of the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans in London. I was not a delegate but the particular meeting I attended was open to all. In the fringes of the meeting I spoke to one of the delegates from Australia, Dr Claire Smith.¹⁴ Her view, which seemed to be shared by several present, was that evangelicals have been dialoguing with liberals in the Church for the last 30 years and the only result has been that

¹⁴ Author of “God’s Good Design: What the Bible Really Says about Men and Women”, Matthias Media, 2012.

the arguments of evangelicals have been ignored and the Anglican Communion has moved ever further in the liberal direction. Therefore, the only possible action left that might save the Church from leading people astray with a false gospel was to take the biblical step of separation in order to bring the heretical part of the Church to repentance.

It needs to be recognised that the GAFCON¹⁵ part of the Anglican Communion say that they represent more than half of the total population of Anglicans, so if there were to be such a separation it could not be lightly ignored.

The speech of the Archbishop of Kenya at the meeting expressed similar sentiments:¹⁶

"Here in the British Isles...persistence has been necessary in the face of institutional inertia and the habit of inconclusive conversation. In June last year the Anglican Mission in England was formed and I ordained three courageous young men from Southwark Diocese in the Kenyan bush, but this was a last resort after four years of discussion with senior Anglican leaders in England failed to find a way in which those genuinely in need of effective orthodox oversight in the Church of England could receive it."

I remember that those who planned the agenda and style of the 2008 Lambeth Conference were well aware of the divisions within the Anglican Communion, and decided that rather than have opportunity for more divisions from arguments over resolutions (e.g. 1998 Lambeth 1:10), the style should be one of sharing and dialogue. As a result the Conference had the 'Indaba' process of discussion groups. Since the Conference this is often reported on as having been a great success. However, it ignores the fact that 150 bishops boycotted the Conference because they considered it would simply be more talking with no opportunity to change Church policy to bring it back into the traditional direction. Therefore, the working group need to be aware that more opportunities for listening and discussion will not work on their own; you can't 'indaba' with those who are not there, a process of liberals talking to liberals will not resolve our differences.

All this illustrates that the forthcoming House of Bishops consultation on issues in human sexuality has to do more than just enable further dialogue. If there is no prospect of an outcome from the dialogue beyond talking, reporting and understanding, I suspect that many conservative evangelicals are unlikely to participate and the dialogue will be ineffective. The consultation therefore needs to be structured in such a way that it holds out the potential for practical change. Questions could for example included issues of the 'here and now' of Church order, such as what should those with a traditional view of sexual ethics do if their diocesan bishop takes a liberal view and they feel that their bishop is leading people astray by promoting a false gospel? Is it legitimate in such circumstances to receive episcopal oversight from a traditional bishop from elsewhere in the Anglican Communion? Given that several provinces have not approved the Covenant, is a gathering around the Jerusalem Declaration by several provinces, something that is legitimate, and should it be officially recognised in the structures of the Church?

The consultation may not want to stray too far into these troubled territories, but listening and talking alone will not be enough.

¹⁵ Global Anglican Future <http://gafcon.org/>

¹⁶ <http://www.anglican-mainstream.net/2012/05/01/standing-together-archbishop-eliud-wabukala-of-kenya-at-fca-meeting-london-april-26/>

Revd James Alison – talk at Changing Attitude

In March 2012 I attended a talk organised by Changing Attitude, by the Catholic theologian and priest James Alison.

He said that he had felt moved to talk about the subject of shame. Gay and lesbian people have a history of being told by others that they do not count, and have shame heaped upon them. However, in the New Testament, to follow Jesus meant being in a place of shame, for example, associating with sinners.

The glory of Jesus is shown by someone living peacefully in a place of shame. Whilst gay people are in a better place than they were 30 years ago regarding civil and human rights, the real hard work is the invisible work of finding ourselves loved in a place of shame; refusing to cover up, and not retaliating when people speak hatefully.

The Beatitudes only make sense as addressed to people in a place of shame. It is dwelling in that place without fighting back that blessedness comes upon us.

By ‘dwelling in a place of shame’ he means a social construct in which we find ourselves, and the question is how not to be run by it, and how to find our liberation. The opposite to dwelling in a place of shame is not being shame free, its being secretly run by shame.

We do need approval, but approval from God, not from a cheap source.

Some churches operate a policy of “don’t ask don’t tell, and we’ll give you a little bit of approval”. But the only real approval is from God and that comes when you stand out in the cold. Standing outside the structures, which is where Jesus stood. Jesus’ glory was revealed on the city dump and gay people are also out of the camp (Hebrews) alongside Him.

Gay people can campaign for change, but in a non-bullying way.

In Acts 10, Peter’s dream, Peter says ‘all this has been forbidden by Leviticus’, but the voice of God says no.

All agree that marriage is a wonderful thing, but the question is what is the appropriate place of celebration for gay relationships?

The Church is supposed to be truth telling to society, but it has been slower than society to struggle with this bit of truth about ourselves, due to the hierarchy which is built on a structure of shame. We can be tender in trying to see how to move this on.

Too much concern at what Rome or Canterbury might say is not good. You don’t go to a soccer match to only look at the linesman. You need to look at Jesus playing with his people. The referee is part of the game, but it’s not all about the ref.

He said, by dwelling in a place of shame, I don’t mean being stuck in passivity, but finding our hearts warmed in parts we thought had been closed down so as not to run the risk of being seen. So we can take action on behalf of others, but not to be knee-jerked.

Revd Bob Callaghan, Inclusive Church

In January 2012 I attended a talk given by the Revd Bob Callaghan, National Coordinator of Inclusive Church. He explained that Inclusive Church works to counter all forms of exclusion. He gave some examples:

- 1.) A vicar who was employed by the diocese as a member of staff for 15 years was finally diagnosed with bipolar disorder, which was being treated by medication. When the diocese found out about his diagnosis they forced him to take early retirement, telling him, “we don’t do mental illness.” The vicar now works for a health authority as a hospital chaplain, who are supporting him in his condition.
- 2.) A man living with a same-sex partner who wanted to go forward for ordination. The diocese said ‘we can’t send you to a Selection Conference because you have been open about this, if you had lied about it and just said you share a house with a friend, you would have been selected.’
- 3.) A single mother who wanted to attend a Church training course, but the Church had organised it at a venue which could only be reached by car. Because she had no car, she was excluded.

Churches often have few young people, so young people can feel isolated, and if you are a gay young person in Church you feel even more isolated. Inclusive Church tries to work with them to encourage them.

Jeremy Marks, Courage (UK)

Jeremy Marks is Director of Courage (UK) and the author of “*Exchanging the truth of God for a lie: One man’s spiritual journey to find the truth about homosexuality and same-sex partnerships*”¹⁷ In February 2012 I attended a meeting at LGCM at which he spoke.

He told how, as a young man he had attended Guildford Baptist Church under David Pawson. He told the minister that he was struggling with homosexual feelings. David Pawson replied that we all have our temptations and this is yours, and this is your struggle. Jesus suffered on the cross for you, you should endure sufferings for him. Over time he received Christian counselling, healing prayer, deliverance ministry, but it all got him nowhere. In 1987 he went to the US to train on the ‘Love in Action’ course which was an ‘ex-gay ministry’. It was centred on Scripture and they had a good Christian support system to help people to turn their back on their gay lifestyle.

He writes in his book, pages 4-5:

“*Courage* was founded in February 1988 under the auspices of my local church. The ministry was set up to support gay Christian people (like myself) who found themselves alone and disenfranchised by their churches. Having struggled with same-sex attractions for over twenty years, I knew there was very little help available. There was even less on offer in the way of hope.

We were all conservative evangelicals who shared the view that the union of a man and a woman fulfils God’s purposes for mankind. Marriage and family life were the essential building blocks for a stable society. We believed that a homosexual orientation was contrary to God’s creation and that the practice of homosexuality was sinful. We took the popularly caricatured emergence of gay lifestyles as indicative of the moral collapse of our society. Our emphasis was on developing a relationship with Christ above all, and on supporting one another on our Christian pilgrimage. If homosexuality was a sign of rebellion against God (Romans 1:18-32), then restoration of our relationship with God would surely be the remedy for any temptation to sexual deviancy.”

Pages 8-9:

“We believed that our struggles to overcome our same-sex attractions were, at last, going to count for something. We had steadfastly refused to follow the way of the world and felt we could stand with our heads up high, confident that we had a place in God’s new kingdom. No longer would we suffer from a deep sense of shame in our hearts, because we had overcome!

In reality, the long-term consequences for many who took part in our discipleship programmes were depressing – near-disastrous for some. The long-term damage to all has been incalculable. A strategy that had largely been inspired by hyped-up charismatic expectations of change proved spiritually catastrophic. Many people gave up their faith altogether. It was financially catastrophic, in that many of us lost practically all we had. It was also mentally and emotionally catastrophic.

¹⁷ Second edition 2009, published by Courage UK

The moral consequences have been extremely serious. I can now clearly see that this demand to follow a fundamentalist biblical perspective and refuse to listen to our intuitive sense of what is right, was utterly abusive and morally indefensible.”

He explains this further in an article on the Courage website¹⁸:

“After ten years, however, six spent running residential discipleship courses, followed by years of weekly group meetings, it was increasingly clear that however repentant people were, and however much dedicated effort they put into seeking change, none were really “successful” in the long term in “dealing with the deeper issues”. This is not to say that people gained no benefit! Many matured greatly. A few went ahead and married, doing so “in faith” that this was God’s perfect will for their lives. However, their same-sex attractions remained an ongoing issue for them (and in quite a few cases, usually after struggling for a number of years, sadly this struggle has brought their marriage to an end). So the kind of change everyone really hoped for—which was to “re-orientate” and reach a point where their struggle against homosexuality was well and truly over, remained at best elusive—and at worst, the disillusionment which set in destroyed their faith. [...]

By contrast, I saw that those who began, on their own initiative, to embrace the possibility of a same-sex relationship, daring to believe their intuitive sense that God was happy with this, benefited greatly.”

Page 33:

“It felt tremendously exciting to be part of a movement that believed one’s life could, ‘in the twinkling of an eye’, become a personal demonstration of God’s healing power... All we needed was faith. I have to say that in those days we all had tremendous faith. With the benefit of hindsight, I realise that what we actually had was faith in Faith. It was not faith in God or we would surely have been changed. It is difficult to truly put one’s confidence in God when the person one understands to be God regards you as a sexual deviant fit only for eternal punishment- unless you can psyche up the faith for deliverance. But eventually we realised that the God was one made in man’s image, as with the worship of all idols, ‘biblical’ or otherwise, we received a meagre dividend.”

At the February 2012 meeting, Mr Marks spoke about the residential community he had run. In their community where they were loved and open about their struggles with being celibate it was OK. But when the people returned to their home churches, they found that nothing had changed and they still had the same orientation. Their receiving churches assumed that the residential experience had ‘healed’ them from their homosexuality and people said things to the returners things like ‘when are we going to hear wedding bells?’, and the individual’s faith was often destroyed. Some came to the conclusion, ‘I can’t choose whether or not I’m gay. I can choose whether or not I’m a Christian. If I can’t be gay and a Christian I won’t be a Christian’. Then they just got on with their life and often met someone they loved of the same sex and were a lot happier in that relationship, not constantly struggling with themselves. Those who weren’t in that internal struggle and were able to worship God, God blessed them. The fruit of it showed that God was at work.

¹⁸ “A Time for Change: New developments at Courage” by Jeremy Marks
<http://www.courage.org.uk/articles/article.asp?id=5>

Mr Marks said that when Courage changed its stance, the evangelical Church turned its back on them as theologically ‘unsound’. However, the organisation continues to provide an oasis for gay Christians to meet and explore in a safe place what God wants for them.

Mr Marks said that gay Christians have great news to share with our heterosexual brothers and sisters of what it means to live an authentic life. To show them what genuine freedom in Christ can look like.