

“ Tricky pastoral issues in the selection process”

This was the title of a conference held at Redcliffe College in January 2004. It was jointly sponsored by Redcliffe College and Global Connections, and was attended by members of 13 mission sending agencies.

Sexuality and lifestyle

I have chosen to look at only two aspects of sexuality, as they relate to the selection process 1) **Sex before marriage** and 2) **Homosexuality**, and how we can approach these areas in a professional way during selection. Perhaps these were not issues 30 years ago, when many of us set out for the mission field, but they certainly are now. This would make it even more necessary to think about these issues and to explore our attitudes to those whose life experience is very different from our own, and who offer themselves for service in mission.

1) Sex before marriage

It is very clear that younger Christians today who are applying to do mission have had a far wider sexual experience than those who applied in the 1960's and 70's.

Richard Tiplady writes in the book *Post Mission*

Most post-modern young people live together or at least have sex before marriage. In many cases, both married and unmarried missionary candidates will have been sexually active prior to conversion, and indeed may be after conversion. (1)

These young people have grown up in a society in which most people accept sex before marriage as normal. Those who are outside the church have made their own guidelines about these things, and are approaching the whole issue of sexual relationships from a certain angle, believing that it is legitimate, good and even necessary for adults to be in a loving sexual relationship when they feel ready for it. Many people feel that if the relationship is loving, exclusive and committed and brings joy and fulfilment to both partners, then it is as good as a marriage, or even better than a marriage. (When you look at some of the disastrous and unhappy marriages portrayed in real life and on the screen, I can understand why marriage is not an attractive option for many sensible and mature people.)

Young Christians have been strongly influenced by this and it is becoming more and more common for Christians to adopt the same lifestyle. They don't necessarily see it as a sin, as long as the relationship is faithful and exclusive. They see it as a good thing, having many benefits for all concerned.

In addition to this, they may not see this as a “moral” issue either, and compared with more pressing problems for the world, this particular issue may be low on their list of priorities.

Richard Tiplady goes on to say

Post-modern Christians –missionaries included, are likely to be more concerned with moral issues such as weapons of mass destruction, environmental destruction, women's rights, Third World debt, racism and child labour. (2)

We certainly find that this is true of many of the young people who come to train at Redcliffe. Those who are serious about their faith are often very challenged about these vital issues and rightly so. However, they are also concerned about sex, marriage and relationships. A few months ago, some of our students asked if we could set up an open discussion on the subject of 'Sex and relationships in a post-modern society'.

With some trepidation, Jonathan and I agreed to facilitate this event, in a comfortable sitting room upstairs and a very informal atmosphere. About 25 students came. Some were single, some were married and they came from many different cultures. It turned out to be a fascinating evening. It was serious, intense, personal, illuminating and at times very moving.

We wrestled with Scripture and Christian concepts of love and faithfulness. What is a marriage? When does a marriage begin? If a couple are exclusively faithful to each other throughout life, does this constitute a marriage in God's eyes, even if they have not taken formal vows?

As the evening went on, something unexpected happened. People began to share some of their own regrets and failures about the relationships they had been in, which had been complex and painful and led to messy break ups and unhappiness. Many of them had been in sexual relationships before conversion, and acknowledged how their own personal and emotional needs had pushed them along into foolish choices and unsatisfactory partnerships almost without realising it. It had left them with burdens of guilt and emotional scars.

It certainly challenged me at a deep level, and made me realise how little I know about the complexity of people's relationships and how judgmental I have been in the past about other people's lives. It so easy to judge people by the outward behaviour and not understand the deeper needs for intimacy, love and acceptance, which they are longing for.

Maybe we need to stop and look at these issues in a different way in order to understand how younger people are approaching these relationships.

2) Homosexuality

It is estimated that at least 5% of adults in the UK have a homosexual orientation. Danny Crowther of the OMF in his interesting MA dissertation, suggests that it could be nearer to 10%. It is very difficult to gather statistics from the general population on such a delicate issue, as the personal risks of being found out and condemned are so high.

But if we take the lower figure of 5% as a working figure, then it means that most of us will have a number of friends and acquaintances who are homosexual in orientation in the work place, in our families and in our churches and mission agencies.

Therefore, in any church of 200 people, there will be approximately 10 men and women who have a homosexual orientation. We are perfectly relaxed and friendly with them because we don't know who they are. They could be single people, living alone or with friends, or they could be married. They could be housewives or mothers, they could be doctors or students or missionaries.

It is interesting to speculate how we might react if we did know who they are. Would we still be relaxed, warm and friendly or would we find ourselves withdrawing from them physically and emotionally? How would we react if a friend of ours shared with us the surprising news of their homosexuality? What would be our own response?

Before I trained as a counsellor, I might have reacted by withdrawing, as I had really not met anyone who would describe themselves as a homosexual. In the 9 years that I have been counselling, my ideas and attitudes have been deeply challenged by reading and talking with others, but most of all by listening to those who struggle to make sense of their sexuality and their experiences. I would like to share with you some of the things I have learned in this process;

- 1) Having a homosexual orientation often causes a great deal of confusion, pain and conflict at a deep emotional level. Christians in this situation not only have to deal with their own feelings and dilemmas, but they are often isolated from their friends and family because they cannot share their secret with others. The very things they need and long for- that is deep friendship, emotional intimacy and affection are beyond their reach, because of fear of rejection and condemnation if anyone were to find out the truth. Their position then can be one of intense and long term loneliness.
- 2) Many Christians who are homosexual have chosen to be celibate and have to give up the idea of a loving partnership or of having children. While many other people are forced to be single for other reasons, e.g. lack of opportunity , bereavement or a specific call to work for God, I believe that this kind of celibacy is of a particularly painful kind and may reinforce an already low self esteem.
- 3) Many homosexual Christians have been hated and condemned by fellow Christians, when they dare to admit their orientation. They are treated with disgust, anger and suspicion, even though they may have renounced sexual relationships and in every respect are living mature and dedicated Christian lives.
- 4) Many people in society believe that homosexuals are promiscuous and likely to molest children in a criminal fashion. This is not the case. Heterosexuals are far more promiscuous and are far more likely to molest children than homosexuals. It is simply not right to assume that because a person has a homosexual orientation, that he or she is going to behave immorally. It is the equivalent to racism of the worst kind, e.g. the assumption some people have made that black people are more likely to be criminals than white people. This is prejudice and slander and attacks a person's integrity and reputation at the deepest level..
- 4) Many Christians who are homosexuals have been told that their orientation is wrong, and therefore should be corrected in various ways in order to become "normal" i.e. heterosexual. They have been instructed to repent, and told that they need to be prayed for, counselled or sometimes exorcised in order to be changed. Only thus can they become normal, and morally acceptable to the Church and to God.

Although some homosexuals have been helped in this way, there are many who feel that this would be impossible. Their sexuality is the deepest part of their identity as it is for us all, and they are simply not able to comply with this. For one thing they feel that their orientation has been in a certain direction since their

earliest awareness, and they cannot change it. For another thing, they struggle very hard with the questions “ Why did God make me like this ? “ and “ How am I going to live ? ” These struggles go on at the much deeper level of the soul and psyche and cannot simply be adjusted by changing behaviour or preference.

3) How do these issues impinge upon the selection process ?

I think they do raise some important questions.

How much do we need to know about the sexual lives of candidates?

What is the most sensitive way of obtaining the information that is needed ?

a) Marriage breakdown and divorce.

It seems reasonable for one or two suitable people to talk through the break down of a marriage or a long term relationship in an atmosphere of acceptance and in confidence. It does not seem a good idea for matters of private grief or failure to be discussed with the candidate by a large interview panel.

b) Sexual relationships before marriage.

How much do the selectors need to know in this case? In some agencies it used to be standard practice to ask for written details of previous intimate relationships on the grounds that this would guide them in assessing the person for missionary service. I do wonder about the ethics of this. Certainly many professional bodies would be aghast at this on the grounds that it is an intrusion against the rights of the individual to privacy in their intimate life. They would also say that it is discriminatory and unethical to demand this information and then refuse a person a position on the basis of it.

So one important question is :- “Do we have the right to ask this person for highly sensitive and personal information ? Why do we need it?”

Is it to make an assessment of their suitability or could it become a judgement on their character? We need to be careful in this case as the human heart so easily stands in judgement over another person and expresses itself in subtle negative assumptions, which may be wrong and unfair.

Or are we secretly intrigued by reading accounts of other people’s sexual or personal failures which may be more colourful than our own ? There is a kind of voyeurism which subtly feeds on other people’s intimate histories and we need to recognise the danger for ourselves.

Knowing about a person’s intimate life also gives us power over them. In the wrong hands, this information can destroy a person’s good reputation and be used against them.

Although written references are not infallible, it would seem better to get realistic references from several people who know the candidate well. If they mention relationship difficulties and behavioural problems, which stem from the past, then these can be discussed with the candidate directly. But if there is no mention of

these, and the referees feel that the candidate makes good and suitable relationships with others, then perhaps there is no need to dig into their personal past.

c) Homosexuality.

How much do selectors need to know about a person's orientation ? How much would it affect their opinion of them, their assessment of their character? How does it connect with their potential as a mission worker ?

Isn't it true that over the centuries of mission work, sterling work has been done in loneliness and humility by those whose sexual orientation is not known to any of us, but only to God?

Perhaps in all these issues the crucial thing is to avoid being unnecessarily intrusive and to honour the right of the candidate to be treated with dignity and respect.

Sue Ingleby
Redcliffe College 2004

Notes

1. Richard Tiplady, *Postmission*, Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002 p.22
2. Ibid p. 25