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***Gay Clergy Count: Visibility and  
Listening in the Church of Ireland***

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# Gay Clergy Count: Visibility and Listening in the Church of Ireland

How many gays and lesbians do you know? The reality is that gays and lesbians are to be found in every family, church and denomination. Look around and it will not be long before you see a gay son, daughter, brother, sister, aunt or uncle, nephew or niece, cousin or close friend. We all have them, but it is just that we may not know about them. If we are to be a truly open and inclusive church, then we need to find ways to welcome by our words and actions those who are often made to feel marginalised and isolated.

Gays and lesbians are also to be found in every occupation, including among the clergy, and even in the Church of Ireland. It may surprise readers to learn that it is likely that they have heard a gay clergyman preach, but more about that later. Among our Anglican neighbours in the Church of England and the North American Anglican Provinces many gay clergymen are visible. In contrast, gay clergy in the Church of Ireland are relatively invisible.

The most common reason for invisibility is the fear of homophobia from some parishioners. Gay clergy are also particularly vulnerable to disciplinary action from their Bishop. They could be open to an action being taken against them in an ecclesiastical court on a charge of “conduct unbecoming of a clergyman”. Reduced visibility of gay clergy in the Church of Ireland is also brought about by involuntary emigration. For example, I am aware of three cases in the 1980s where the sexuality of gay clergy who had been working quietly in their parishes came to the attention of their Bishops. The Bishops were not supportive and they were given the choice of resigning from the parish or emigrating to England – always the answer to Ireland’s problems! It is worth noting that a number of gay clergy trained in the Church of Ireland have served abroad with distinction within the Anglican Communion. Some of these have been able to

## NOTES

1. Malcolm Macourt “*Towards a theology of gay liberation*”, London: SCM Press, 1977.
2. *The Irish Times*, 30<sup>th</sup> January 1999, ‘C of I out of touch, Dean claims’ report by Lorna Siggins.
3. Letter of invitation from Bishops to clergy 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2004
4. “Christian and Homosexual? Anglicans consider the Issues”. Catalyst pamphlet No. 11, June 2004.
5. “A conversation with Archbishop Harper”. p. 98 *Search*, Vol 30 No.2 Summer 2007.
6. *Church of Ireland Gazette* 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2006.
7. Church of Ireland press release 12/06/06 [www.ireland.anglican.org/](http://www.ireland.anglican.org/)
8. It is widely agreed that the percentage of gay persons in society is in the range 5%-10%. The percentage of minority ethnic persons (African, Chinese, other Asian and mixed ethnic categories) in the Church of Ireland in the Republic of Ireland according to the 2006 Census was 5.29% (*Census 2006*, volume 5, Ethnic and Cultural background).
9. p.325 *Armagh Clergy 1800 – 2000* Revd. W.E.C. Fleming.
10. One parish has had 7 gay clergy, two parishes had 5, and 4 parishes have had 4 gay clergy since the second world war.
11. “Crockford’s Clerical Directory 2006/2007” 99<sup>th</sup> edition, (and earlier editions). Church House Publishing
12. Two of the Services of Blessing took place in 2004, prior to the introduction of Civil Partnership

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legal recognition to gay and lesbian clergy within the Church of Ireland which the Bishops will not be able to ignore. For example, the Church of Ireland Pensions Board will have to administer Civil Partnership Survivor's Pension.

It is clear that gay clergy and lay persons have not been adequately involved in the listening process to date. What is needed is a listening exercise at rural deanery and diocesan level, where clergy and lay church members get to meet in person some of the gay Christians who serve and worship in our churches. To assist the listening process in the Church of Ireland, a new group *Changing Attitude Ireland* has recently been formed. It is a network of clergy and laypersons, including the full range of sexual orientations - heterosexuals, bisexuals, gays and lesbians – committed to working for Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgendered affirmation in the Church of Ireland. This includes working for change in the official teaching and attitude of the Church of Ireland and the provision of services of blessing for same sex couples in church using an authorised liturgy. *Changing Attitude Ireland* recently initiated a 'Listening Process' meeting called 'Listening to Gay Christians' within a clerical rural deanery in the Diocese of Down. The clergy present said it was the first time they had participated in such a discussion with a gay Christian. They said they welcomed the opportunity for dialogue and declared it would help them in the pastoral care which they recognized they should provide to gays and lesbians within their parishes.

Gay clergy are and have been part of the Church of Ireland for many decades. By our reckoning a majority of parishes in the Church of Ireland have already had an experience of a resident gay clergyman. In our view the challenge is how to release them from invisibility, to value them and draw on their particular experience as part of a meaningful 'Listening Process' with gay Christians.

Further information on Changing Attitude Ireland may be obtained from the website [www.changingattitudeireland.org](http://www.changingattitudeireland.org)

serve as openly gay clergymen supported by their parishioners and Bishops.

### **The consequences of invisibility**

The invisibility of gay clergy matters because it has personal and institutional consequences. At the personal level many closeted gay clergy struggle in isolation with their sexuality and the Church's response to it. Other gay clergy although happy with their sexuality live under the great strain of keeping this important part of their lives a secret from their Bishop and their parishioners. This can be exacerbated at times when gay clergy need pastoral care. Two gay clergy have reported to me that they have felt that Bishops know that they are gay and have simply tried to avoid contact with them, such is their embarrassment or disapproval, even if it means not providing pastoral care to their clergy. In relation to the issue of homosexuality the general Church of Ireland policy seems to be "don't ask, don't tell". While this approach can provide some space for gay clergy to exist within the Church of Ireland, it falls far short of the acceptance of and pastoral care for gay clergy which has been achieved in other provinces of the Anglican Communion. Furthermore, it perpetuates invisibility and does not facilitate the much heralded 'Listening Process'.

At least we have come some way since Malcolm Macourt's book "Towards a theology of gay liberation" was kept under the counter in the APCK bookshop in Belfast to reduce embarrassment. 1 At the institutional level the Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops in 1998, through its Lambeth 1:10 directive, encouraged Dioceses "to commit themselves to listen to the experience of homosexual persons and to assure them that they are loved by God and that all baptised, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation are full members of the body of Christ." To this end resources were provided on the Anglican Communion website as a template to facilitate active listening, engagement and dialogue. Some clergy, who may not necessarily be gay, who have contributed to the discussion about homosexuality, have been disappointed with the receptivity to debate in Ireland. For example, one Irish clergyman reported that after he aired his liberal views on homosexuality his Bishop received complaints from his parishioners and

he experienced verbal aggression. He decided to leave Ireland to work in North America. 2

The Pastoral Letter from the Bishops of the Church of Ireland, *Human Sexuality*, issued in September 2003 stated that “*Where there is dialogue within the dioceses and between local communities, it should above all include those who are most immediately affected by the discussion.*” We have seen little evidence of this being put into practice on the ground. For example, while the recent ‘Listening Process’ promoted by the Bishops is to be welcomed, it did not offer sufficient assurances to gay clergy that they would not be disciplined by making themselves known. 3 The person appointed with Communion wide responsibility for the ‘Listening Process’ is Canon Phil Groves. However, it seems that his contact with the Irish dioceses has been fairly minimal. The organization *Catalyst* on its own initiative has produced a booklet and engaged in public discussion. 4 Some literature is also available from the organization *Changing Attitude England*, which has sent its quarterly newsletter to the Irish Bishops for the past eight years.

In a recent interview the Archbishop of Armagh admitted in relation to gay members of the Church of Ireland that “*We haven’t adequately listened to the stories of gay people; or adequately lived up to our obligations to pastoral care*”. 5 If gay clergy are too afraid to come forward, because of their fear of homophobia and their concern about being disciplined, how are they to be listened to? If the Bishops and senior officers of the Church of Ireland are inhibited or lack the knowledge or willingness to engage with gay clergy, how can a full ‘Listening Process’ take place? Some Bishops have been reluctant to engage in the discussion about homosexuality. Among the Bishops who have commented on the issue, there has been a variety of perspectives. The Bishop of Down Rt. Revd. Harold Miller said at his diocesan clerical conference in 2006 that “*his and his wife’s experience of Lambeth 1998 had been like a foretaste of heaven, but that Satan had then entered in with the homosexual controversy*”. 6

On the other hand, the Bishop of Cork, Rt. Revd. Paul Colton said that “*because the presenting issue of the controversy within Anglicanism appears to be human sexuality, one result is that gay people have be-*

### **Forces for change to visibility and the future of the ‘Listening Process’**

Developments within both the Anglican Communion and wider society are working to increase the visibility of gay clergy and to change their status within the Church of Ireland. Dioceses of the Episcopal Church in North America and of the Church of England have for decades accepted openly gay clergy, including partnered gay clergy. This has had little impact on the Church of Ireland apart from illustrating what might be possible in Ireland in the coming years. However, the decision by the Church of England in 2003 to nominate an openly gay Dean Jeffrey John to the vacant bishopric of Reading, (subsequently withdrawn) and the decision by the Episcopal Church of the USA to endorse the appointment of an openly gay clergyman, Gene Robinson to be Bishop of New Hampshire has not left the Church of Ireland unaffected. These developments abroad have attracted much publicity in the secular media and some discussion in the media of the Church of Ireland. Furthermore, the issue has been taken up by the Primates meetings of the Anglican Communion, at which the Church of Ireland is represented. Therefore, it is increasingly difficult for the House of Bishops not to address the issue.

In the absence of visible gay Irish clergy, visits by openly gay overseas clergy can be instructive. This is illustrated by Limerick Diocese which has had an established link with New Hampshire Diocese. This has been mutually beneficial, in terms of building trust and informing attitudes. The following account was related to me. On one of their visits to USA the Limerick clergy were being entertained at a dinner party. One of the Limerick men was keen to find out who Bishop Gene Robinson’s partner was. Another colleague was able to tell him afterwards, “*It was the man you spent all evening talking to*”.

The other major development has been the impact of UK equality legislation. Of most significance is the Civil Partnership Act 2005. Clergy of the Church of Ireland are legally entitled to enter into same sex Civil Partnerships and this can be expected to occur. This can provide

evangelical. While the greater acceptance and higher presence of gay clergy within the catholic tradition is generally recognized, the presence of gays within the evangelical tradition is less well known. In this regard I may draw on my own experience of a large evangelical Belfast Parish. Over a period of thirty years I have become aware of 11 gay Church of Ireland persons, including Sunday school teachers, choir members and former members of the Boys Brigade and Christian Endeavour. They were all actively engaged in the work of the parish, but of course homosexuality was never discussed. Of these 11, five were members of the Fellowship of Vocation. Two were ordained and one became a Diocesan Reader. Three persons originally from that parish but now living elsewhere have entered into Civil Partnership - One after 26 years, one after 16 years and one after 8 years. Each had a service of blessing, one at home and two in church. <sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately, not all gay persons are treated without prejudice at church. In the course of my research I was told the following account which relates to a former vestry member who in 2004 told his Rector that he was gay. Consequently, the Rector told the churchwardens they were not to ask him to read the lessons in church. The churchwardens ignored the Rector's instruction. In 2007 when the same Rector asked for volunteers to visit housebound parishioners, the gay person put his name on the list. The Rector later advised him that his offer would not be taken up, because he was gay and living with a civil partner. This raises the issues of suitability and acceptability, which need to be addressed, so that we know exactly what tasks gay members of local congregations (or those in civil partnership) are permitted, or not permitted to carry out within the Church of Ireland. Just as there is no justification for discriminating against divorced persons, there is no justification for discriminating against homosexuals within the church.

*come scapegoats in what is a more deep-seated constitutional crisis". He elaborated that "Therefore, gay people in lay and ordained leadership as well as in voluntary work in our churches, or simply in our pews, or those who have been driven away by a sense of rejection, together with gay people in the community outside the Church need to know and to hear our apology. Gay people in the Church have been caught in the middle of a row which is primarily about the way different Anglicans read, approach and understand the holy Scriptures, the Bible". <sup>7</sup> It is not clear how many other Bishops share his view that apology is appropriate and how the Bishops collectively intend to move from expressions of regret for prejudice to effective action to change prejudice.*

The Church of Ireland's Hard Gospel Project is meant to deal with the challenging issues around prejudice in our society. It has been most concerned to date with the issue of sectarianism. It is also seriously engaging with the important issue of racism and the challenge of integrating ethnic minorities. However, it has paid relatively little attention to homophobia and the pastoral care of gay parishioners and clergy. This is consistent with the general Church of Ireland approach of avoidance around the gay issue. It is all the more striking given that there are arguably as many gay members of the Church of Ireland as minority ethnic members. <sup>8</sup> While the response of the Church should not be dependent on numbers, the lack of visibility of gay clergy appears to be hampering the listening process and the progression to dialogue.

### **The presence of Gay clergy among us**

As part of this paper I have considered the question of the numerical presence of gay clergy, past and current, in Church of Ireland parishes. The time frame is the period since the second world war. The invisibility poses a methodological problem in estimating how widespread their presence has been. Given the fear among gay clergy in having their homosexuality becoming known to their Bishops and parishioners, there are barriers to how information about their existence can become known to us. Nevertheless, their existence can be revealed through at least three sources.

My main method for counting the presence of gay clergy is through di-

rect personal enquiries to gay clergy who are known to me. The author has been privileged to provide a small measure of pastoral care to gays and lesbians, including clergy, for the past 26 years. Gay clergy are also much more likely to be aware of other gay clergy. This can come about through close friendships some of which are formed during training, through direct personal disclosure, through encounters at gay pubs and clubs, through observation at gay meeting places. Information was obtained through gay clergy providing to the author, in confidence, basic information about the existence of other gay clergy whom they personally knew to be gay through the ways described above. Through this method I was able to count 51 gay clergy.

A second source of information is the small number of cases which come to public attention through court appearances and are reported in the media. I identified nine court cases involving Church of Ireland clergy related to homosexual activity. These cases have the unfortunate effect of fixing in some peoples' minds an association between homosexuality and criminality. Four of these cases involved what in legal terms are regarded as relatively minor offences. The effect of such incidents is likely to have disproportionate consequences in a society with high levels of homophobia and fear of disclosure. In one reported case it led to the suicide of the clergyman who was due to appear in court.

Thirdly, I separately noted a smaller number of second-hand indirect claims (e.g. by non-gay clergy, lay relatives and close friends of gay clergy). Through this method the author identified an additional five gay clergy. This is less reliable than the other two methods and the quality can vary depending on the source, so I tried to apply a reasonable threshold for inclusion (e.g. based on the closeness of the personal relationship).

What is evident from this enquiry is the following: Among 65 gay Church of Ireland clergy identifiable since the second world war, 17 have died, 8 are retired, 23 are no longer serving in the Church of Ireland (of which 12 are serving abroad and 11 are no longer in ministry). At least 17 are presently serving in the Church of Ireland. The latter is arguably an underestimation as it represents only those who are have become visible within a discreet and limited enquiry. 12 were gay and

married. It is more difficult to establish whether gay clergy have had a long term partner; therefore any count is likely to be an underestimation. However, at least 9 of the 65 are known to have had long term gay partners and of these in 3 cases the partner was another clergyman. Our count includes 12 Canons, 4 Deans and 4 Archdeacons. There is no record of any gay bishops among the above, although this has been known to occur in the Church of Ireland in the past, most notably the case of Rt Revd. and Hon. Percy Jocelyn Bishop of Clogher, a former Rector of Creggan in Armagh Diocese, who was deprived of his Office in 1822 following his arrest because of a homosexual liaison. 9

The gay clergymen have on average each served in 4 parishes. 10 In addition their home parishes have known them (the 65 gay clergy came from 56 different parishes before they were ordained) and we may also include the parishes to which gay clergy have retired. By noting from *Crockford's Clerical Directory* 11 and other sources, all the individual parishes where these gay clergy have come from, served in and retired to, what becomes clear is that by our reckoning a majority (235 of 464) of parishes, in the Church of Ireland have had an experience of a resident gay clergyman in the period from the second world war.

By drawing attention to the not insignificant number of gay clergy in the Church of Ireland and by showing how they have and are serving in all parts of the Church of Ireland, the reader is reminded that the issue of gay clergy is not a distant or abstract issue but part of the reality of parish life in Ireland. Most of the gay clergy were/are highly respected, and their ministry was acceptable in each place, but of course the parishes did not know about their sexuality. Most of the gay clergy counted above would also have been invited annually to visit other parishes as Harvest Preachers. Therefore the combination of clergy, both resident and as visiting preachers means it would not be an exaggeration to claim that that it is likely that the large majority of parishioners have heard a gay clergyman preach.

Furthermore, it is evident that gay clergy are to be found in all shades of churchmanship in the Church of Ireland, from catholic to