

Polygamy

In the recent Communion debates about sexuality reference has been made to polygamy and the inconsistency represented by its alleged acceptance in some provinces which are most hostile to acceptance of same-sex unions. This is a serious misrepresentation of both the history and the current reality in relation to polygamy. The reality is that from the third Lambeth Conference in 1888 Anglicans took a strongly non-accommodationist stance in response to what it described as “polygamy of heathen converts”. Polygamists were to be refused even baptism as long as they had more than one wife. Recognising the power imbalance, a more accommodating approach was permitted for polygamists’ wives who could be admitted in some cases to baptism at the discretion of the local church. This and other questions arising out of mission in cultures which lacked a Christian understanding of marriage continued to be addressed so in 1920 a committee on missionary problems also rejected baptism of “a person married as a non-Christian to a person whose relationship to him or her is within the degrees prohibited by the Christian Church unless they separate after due arrangement made for the future of the wife”. Although the difficulties with such rigorist pastoral practice were increasingly acknowledged at Lambeth Conferences it was not until 1988 that the stance changed.

The 1988 conference, in resolution 26, upheld “monogamy as God's plan, and as the ideal relationship of love between husband and wife” but now permitted the baptism and confirmation of converted polygamists. It do so however on three conditions – (1) a promise “not to marry again as long as any of his wives at the time of his conversion are alive”, (2) the consent of the local Anglican community to receiving such a polygamist, and (3) the refusal to compel putting away any of the wives which would lead to their social deprivation. Recognising that some became polygamists after conversion it also called on provinces to share “their pastoral approach to Christians who become polygamists so that the most appropriate way of disciplining and pastoring them can be found”.

Here again there is a genuine pastoral accommodation as defined earlier. There is a witness to the norm in teaching and in the conditions set down when moving to no longer exclude those whose situation did not conform to that norm. The accommodation extends only to permitting baptism and confirmation. It remains the case that no Anglican province will accept a current polygamist into orders or in any sense celebrate a polygamous marriage. Those Christians who do enter a polygamous marriage are usually disciplined in some way such as being refused participation in communion and/or removal from ministry.

If polygamy were to be taken as a model for pastoral accommodation to those in same-sex unions – a parallel which clearly would need justification - then the most obvious application would be to allow their baptism and confirmation subject to a promise not to enter another same-sex union once this one ended. There would however be no permission for those in such unions to be ordained or to have their unions celebrated in church. The church would also be expected to find the most appropriate way to discipline and pastor any Christian who enters such a union. Clearly this is an even more limited form of pastoral accommodation than that currently permitted within the Church of England.

In summary, an appeal to the church’s response to polygamy, accommodation to which clearly has biblical precedent, is not able to justify any further pastoral accommodation. In fact, if the two situations are similar in terms of their representing a departure from the church’s teaching, what is being sought for those in same-sex unions in cultures where such unions are accepted would entail a radical liberalisation of policy in relation to those polygamous unions in cultures where those unions are accepted.