

Would inclusivity alienate our global partner churches?

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If the Presbyterian Church (U. S. A.) decides to recognize the Christian discipleship of gay and lesbian persons and offer them ordination to the ministry of the church, will it affect their ecumenical relations with their partner churches all over the world, especially the ones in the so-called Third World? I want to address this question as an individual Presbyterian of the Church of South India (CSI). (I am *not* offering here any official position of the CSI). CSI came into existence in 1947 as an organic union of Anglican, British Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregationalist churches in South India. Since then, CSI has maintained a healthy partnership with churches connected to all the four denominational traditions, including the PC(U.S.A.). CSI values greatly its relation with those churches.

How would the people in the Church of South India react to the inclusivity of the PC(U.S.A.)? Given the spiritual climate of our congregations, one may guess three kinds of reaction. A majority of members of the Church of South India may have a knee-jerk reaction to your desire to be inclusive in matters of sexual orientation. They would see your inclusivity as something contrary to the teachings of the Bible and the church. The knowledge of the Bible has been one of our priorities in the congregations in South India, especially in Tirunelveli diocese that I belong to. Many read the Bible daily and carry a copy of the Bible wherever they go. On every Sunday children memorize the biblical verse assigned for that Sunday and recite it before the congregation during worship. Therefore, our people are very familiar with the biblical texts that seem to prohibit homosexual relations. On the basis of those texts one many would find oneself themselves strongly condemning any attempt to be inclusive.

There are others in our churches who may be troubled by the controversy regarding sexual orientation for a very different reason.

From the book

Frequently Asked Questions About Sexuality, The Bible, and The Church: Plain Talk about Tough Issues

A collection of essays considering the appropriate participation of gay and lesbian Presbyterians in church life and leadership.

They would argue that this controversy is a distraction from what we are really called to do. The economically poor are right in our midst, and their needs are so great that we simply cannot afford to be distracted into considering matters of sexual orientation. “When people are dying of starvation and malnutrition on our streets, both in the USA and in India, can anyone possibly care about what people do in their bedrooms?” This is the kind of question they would raise. The question of inclusivity is a luxury that well-fed, well-clothed, and well-cared -for Christians can afford to have. If one takes seriously the mandate given by Jesus during his preaching in his home town Nazareth, we should be out there working for the liberation of people who suffer because of poverty, war, and oppression.

There is a small minority of people who recognize the ambiguity surrounding the biblical teaching on sexual orientation and wish to remain open on the issue. Such people want to listen more to the arguments on both sides before they make up their minds. To be inclusive, for them, is a gospel mandate, and therefore they cannot alienate a whole group of persons simply on the basis of a few selected texts from the Bible. They are also aware that homosexuality is a fact before it becomes an act – that is, it is a mode of being and not simply a way of acting. The stance against slavery and the ordination of women into the ministry of the church are instances where the church recognized the culturally conditioned nature of biblical teachings and moved away from merely depending on isolated texts. In a similar vein, perhaps the church should reinterpret the texts regarding sexual orientation taking into account the contemporary discipleship of gay and lesbian Christians.

It is important to note that Christians in different parts of the world take a variety of positions when it comes to the question of inclusivity.

It is clear that Christians in CSI – let alone Christians across the global South – do not all have the same kind of reaction to the issue of inclusivity. The question that we are addressing here makes an implicit assumption that the partner churches have a single monolithic view regarding sexual orientation and therefore that the decision to be inclusive will alienate the partner churches. It is important to note that Christians in different parts of the world take a variety of positions when it comes to the question of inclusivity.

Much more important in this discussion is how we view ecumenical relations. Whether the partner churches will be alienated or not is dependent on our understanding of ecumenism. We, in South India, have learnt in our own history of church union that unity is not the same as uniformity. The four

denominational traditions that came together to form the Church of South India were intentional in allowing the individual traditions to thrive within the united church. Anyone who travels to the various congregations of CSI will immediately notice the rich variety of practices, worship patterns, theological stances, and church governance within the CSI. If uniformity is the goal of unity, then CSI is NOT a united church at all.

But our vision of unity makes room for difference., and therefore the decision of the PC(U.S.A.)(USA) to ordain gays and lesbians, therefore, should not alienate the CSI, because we know that we can remain united without being uniform in our expressions of Christian discipleship. Our contexts are different and therefore our expressions of Christian obedience will also be different. If the task of each church is to “read” its context carefully and prayerfully, and in the name of gospel of Christ find ways to offer love and care to all those who are alienated and oppressed in that particular context, then your decision cannot and should not affect our ecumenical relations negatively. We are together in Christ with a variety of gifts, concerns, and patterns of discipleship.

There is an irony behind the question we are addressing. Do the churches in the West really care about the opinion of churches in the Third World when it comes to matters of theology, doctrine, and Christian practice? Are the theological and ministerial resources of the partner churches in the Third World readily and enthusiastically consulted in the seminaries and divinity schools in the First World? Or is it the case that some Christians in the West want to enlist the support of those in the Third World simply because it promotes their own theological agenda? A further irony is that many of the Third World churches are still so dependent on the economic resources of the churches in the West that they choose not to be alienated even when decisions are made without any reference to them.

In all these considerations, one thing is clear to me. Our call, wherever we are, is to bear witness to the all-embracing love of God revealed in the face of Jesus the Christ. Such witness demands that we wrestle with the needs of our context and discover our particular contextual obedience to the gospel. In the Holy Spirit we are given the freedom of the children of God to choose those forms of obedience that fulfill the church’s mission in our own context today. It is this freedom that unites us as one family of faith.

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