

LEARNING FROM THE UNDERSIDE OF HISTORY

“Who is permitted to have a history and who is not is a vital issue. Those who have no memories or story have no life.”

Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History* – 1991

In his book Philip Sheldrake describes how history is always written by those with power. The stories of the powerless are forgotten, suppressed or distorted.

Sheldrake goes on to describe how, in recent decades, academics and campaigners have worked to recover stories “from the underside of history”, seeking to redress the balance.

Slavery stories, colonialism stories, women’s stories, black and minority ethnic stories, LGBTQ+ stories. These are histories that challenge the dominant narrative both within the church and in wider society. It is important that we hear these stories. We learn by studying history. The lessons we learn will be damaged if the history we use is suppressed or distorted.¹

What follows is my own attempt to learn some lessons for the LLF process by telling my own story from the underside of gay history.

¹ Recent examples of stories from the underside may include Steve McQueens’s recent Small Axe TV series on BBC1, telling of the brutality and discrimination experienced by the Afro-Caribbean inhabitants of 1990s West London. Then there is the National Galleries major rehabilitation and re-appraisal of the forgotten woman artist Artemisia Gentileschi. Or at a smaller scale, Louise Stewart’s project to promote the work of neglected women composers of sacred music - <https://www.multitudeofvoyses.co.uk/>

Page 98 of the Living in Love and Faith document contains the following text

“Following the election of a Labour government in 1997, there was an increased liberalization of the laws concerning homosexual activity. The age of consent was reduced again to 16. The bar to LGBT people serving in the armed forces was removed. Until then, military personnel found guilty of same-sex activity could be immediately discharged for gross misconduct.

This quote seems to imply that these legal changes came as a result of the election, and were instigated by the new Blair Government. But this is the opposite of what happened. The change was actually triggered by a small group of ex Armed Forces personnel who had been sacked, or who had chosen to resign prematurely, because of their homosexuality. (I was one of those who resigned, to escape from increasing emotional damage).

Starting in the late 90s we developed a campaign to overturn the ban. In public we used the media to promote our cause, but were vigorously opposed by a small but equally vocal group of anti-gay campaigning ex-servicemen. Then behind the scenes we were helped by some sympathetic lawyers to challenge the legal bar through the courts. *Note that our legal challenge was opposed by the Blair Government every step of the way.*

In 1999 the ban was overturned at the European Court of Human Rights. The Ministry of Defence had no choice but to develop policies and procedures to manage the introduction of “out” gay serving personnel. To their credit they realised that they needed expert assistance, and they asked us (the gay campaigners) for help. We were invited into the Ministry to advise their civil servants on policy development. The eventual transition (in early 2000) was very successful. Some of our campaigners even re-enlisted to complete their careers.

So why am I telling you this story? What lessons are there to learn?

Firstly, it’s about history. We can learn from history. But it is so easy for history to be distorted. With our memories of the Blair Government and its self-represented Britpop, New Britannia radicalism we find it so easy to believe

that they would want to promote homosexual law reform, and hard to believe that they would oppose it.

But if we can't tell an accurate story from the Blair years, within living memory, how difficult will it be to find accurate history from Centuries ago? We must be aware of how common it is to hear distorted history. We must pay attention to the underside of history, and to competing narratives about the same event.²

Secondly, it is about radicalism. Campaigners are often asked "Why do you need to be so noisy, and forceful, and argumentative. Why can't we sit down quietly and dispassionately to discuss these things? Surely we can negotiate a way forward?"

But from the Bristol Bus Boycott to Nelson Mandela's South Africa, experience tells us that those in power will not willingly choose to debate and give up their power. Such negotiations only happen when campaigners have created a situation where those with the power have more to lose by not talking to you than by talking. Then they come to the table. How to achieve that will vary from case to case. Sadly, it is rarely done by being nice. The difficult trick for both sides is how to judge the appropriate moment to switch from conflict to co-operation. Perhaps the Armed Forces transition worked so well because the campaigners and civil servants both got that bit right.

But the third lesson relates most directly to LLF and is the one I want to focus on. This lesson is drawn from one specific experience as we developed policy together after the ban was overturned. As we planned the transition to an "out" Armed Forces, both the MOD authorities and the campaigners expected that the transition might be difficult and strongly opposed by many. In fact, it went much smoother than expected. Very few of the vast mass of serving personnel objected or created problems. We had misjudged it.

² For good examples of what I am calling for see Prof Diarmaid MacCulloch's masterclass in paying correct attention to the history of sex and marriage.

<https://modernchurch.org.uk/prof-diarmaid-macculloch-living-in-love-and-faith/> . Or Peterson Toscano's "Joseph and the Amazing Gender Non-Conforming Bible story (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkikBKW8vmQ&t=605s>) . Or there is Edward Carpenter, the Grandfather of such research, with his Century old exploration of diverse sexualities within religious and military cultures (<http://www.edwardcarpenter.net/ecpftite.htm>)

We realised in hindsight that the campaigners and the Ministry authorities had only ever interacted with the vocal anti-gay campaign. We had projected those views onto the entire Armed Forces. By the late 1990s most serving personnel already had out gay friends and family members and were actually quite relaxed about homosexuality. It's just that nobody thought to ask them what they might think. We assumed that they would be anti-gay, and had not realised how much opinions had moved over the decades.

Once the MOD mandarins fully understood the actual views of their own serving personnel, they became much more relaxed, and they were able to develop excellent policy without our help. Within a few years members of the Armed Forces were marching in uniform in the London Gay Pride Celebration. and the Ministry of Defence won an award from Stonewall for the quality of its gay related HR and recruitment policies.

Applying this to the church and LLF what can we learn? Like for my Armed Forces example, there are four main groups of people to consider within the church.

- There is a minority group of LGBTQ+ Christians and their active supporters. Some are "out" and actively involved in the debate whilst others remain hidden to various levels.
- There is a group of conservative Christians actively opposed to their arguments.
- In the middle there is a vast centre ground of ordained and lay Christians whose views (as yet) have not been seriously canvassed.
- And there is the House of Bishops. Many members of the House of Bishops seem to be holding back from this debate, in public, for whatever reasons. But they need to be considered here because (like the Ministry of Defence civil servants) they are the people who make the policy decisions.

If the LLF process is all about discussion and debate then what debates need to happen? Which group needs to be heard, and which groups needs to interact with whom?

I would argue that continued debate between the two opposing, vocal, minorities will not be helpful to LLF. It will be fractious and argumentative and change nobody's mind.

Similarly, it is not important that members of the minority group of LGBTQ Christians speak within LLF unless, of course, they want to. It would be too easy to put excessive pressure onto people who are anxious about their emotional safety, and risk making them feel that they are letting the side down if they stay quiet.

Instead, the voice that does need to be heard within LLF is the voice of the Silent Centre Ground.

I am convinced both from my own experience from over 20 years as an out, partnered, and now married, gay Christian minister, and from a number of opinion surveys, that the vast majority of silent centre ground Christians are in favour of a more compassionate church policy towards gay relationships, gay marriage and other issues in the LGBTQ+ domain. Like for the Armed Forces these people already have family members and friends and work colleagues from that background. They already have a positive attitude to these issues. It's just that within the church there have been no large-scale programmes to canvas their views, and too many priests and ministers have been too nervous to trigger a discussion.³

It is this large centre ground of the Church whose voices need to be heard within LLF.

I can understand why church leaders at all levels might be nervous about this. The strongest voices that anybody hears are vocal conservative and LGBTQ+ minorities. It's like the campaigners and MOD civil servants of twenty years ago. All we heard was fractious debate, and very understandably we were concerned for the process.

³ The story of Lizzie Lowe and St James and Emmanuel Church in Didsbury is instructive here. It is a tragedy that it took a girl's suicide to bring about proper debate within a church. Beforehand even the ministers admitted to being unwilling to openly debate sexuality within the church community. Afterwards, when people started talking properly to each other, it was found that the church membership wanted to keep their Evangelical ethos but move strongly in a more inclusive, liberal, direction.

What I see in the church today is very much like what I saw as a serving officer in the mess decks and wardrooms of a warship decades ago. If one or two people make strong anti-LGBTQ statements then very few people actively speak out publicly to oppose it. Whether in a small rural parish hall, or full Diocesan Synod, it is only in the safety of subsequent tea room conversations that you realise people's true opinions, and that many people in that room are much more liberal on these issues.

That sadly is the culture of the Church of England. In an attempt not to cause offence we often conceal our views and true selves. Those who are able and willing to speak out strongly then gain control of what is allowed to be said. An assertively projected minority view can conceal the views of the less assertive, unrepresented majority.⁴

So our first task then, as priests and ministers tasked by the Bishops with managing the LLF process, is to find a way for this vast, silent, centre ground to be heard.

Barbara Brown once wrote "What if people were invited to church to come tell what they already know of God, instead of to learn what they are supposed to believe." I hope LLF can be seen in this light.

What if people were invited into the LLF process to come tell what they already know of LGBT lives and relationships, instead of to learn what they are supposed to believe.

Thinking of Gamaliel in chapter 5 of Acts, Christian individuals and communities will already have lived amongst people with LGBT lives and relationships for the past thirty years. They will already know what they have seen of God in those lives, and what is not. They will already have seen what sort of lives bear fruit, and which do not.

If LLF can focus on conversations like that then I hope it can be a rich and fertile process.

⁴ What happens locally happens nationally and internationally as well. The recent media frenzy about St Helen's Bishopsgate's "Broken Partnership" with the Church of England leads us to forget that many hundreds, if not thousands, of other CofE churches would happily move in a more liberal direction if asked. Similarly, one of the main arguments presented against moving the CofE in a more liberal direction on sexuality is that it would damage ecumenical relationships with more conservative foreign churches. But in making this argument we are responding only to the conservative church leaders, and not hearing the voices of LGBTQ+ members of those same churches who are desperate for change.

But our second task is to pass on that voice, so that it is heard and understood by the Bishops. The Bishops have reserved for themselves through the “Next Steps” group the right to make decisions about the outcomes from LLF. But quite probably the strongest voices that the bishops also are currently hearing are those of fractious debate, and they too might be anxious about the process.

If we can help the Bishops to hear the voices of this large but un-listened-to centre ground, perhaps they too might lose their anxiety, and be reassured that if they move the church in a more liberal and compassionate direction, they will take the vast majority of the church with them.

Simon Dawson

mail@simondawson.com

www.simondawson.com

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