

The Silent Centre Ground

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

“Following the election of a Labour government in 1997. . . 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. The army, navy and air force subsequently introduced many changes to their procedures, including representation on Pride marches and recruitment advertisements in LGBT magazines.”

This raises an interesting question. If a major institution such as the Armed Forces can have a total reversal of policy in under five years, why are we in the Church still stuck with endless debate after fifty?

What follows is my own attempt to learn some lessons for the LLF process having been closely involved in that Armed Forces transformation.

The story as given above is not quite correct. Rather than Governmental action the change was actually triggered by a group of campaigning, ex Armed Forces personnel who had lost their careers because of their homosexuality. (I was a member of that small group). We challenged the bar through the courts and eventually prevailed at the European Court of Human Rights. The Ministry of Defence had no choice but to manage the introduction of “out” gay serving personnel.

To their credit the Ministry realised that they needed expert assistance and they asked us (the gay campaigners) for help. We were invited into Whitehall to advise their civil servants on policy development. The eventual transition in early 2000 was very successful and 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?

As we planned the transition to an “out” Armed Forces both the MOD authorities and we campaigners expected that the transition might be strongly opposed. In fact, it was much smoother than expected. Very few of the vast mass of serving personnel objected or created problems. We had misjudged it.

We realised in hindsight that both the campaigners and the authorities had only ever interacted with a vocal anti-gay minority. We had projected their negative 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 many decades.

I think the same is true of the Church. I am convinced both from my own Church experience and from a number of opinion surveys that the vast majority of these 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.

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. I hope that LLF can break through this, and allow the voice of that vast Silent Centre Ground to be heard.

Many priests and ministers appear daunted by the task of LLF and not quite sure where to begin. I can understand this nervousness because all we hear in public is fractious debate.

I would argue that within LLF the task is not to create even more fractious debate between the two opposing, vocal, minorities. Nor is it 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 task of LLF is simply to allow the voice of that silent, unlistened-to, majority 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 such conversations then I hope it has the potential to be a rich and fertile process.

Similarly, if we can help the Bishops to hear the voices of this large but unlistened-to centre ground, then I hope that 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.

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