

## Foreword

Kenneth Kearon's volume: *Marriage and Relationships: An Anglican Exploration* is comprehensive, charitable and careful. Its purpose is to equip people to stand back from, but not to shirk, moral issues which are important because they are individual as well as being corporate. For this reason, the architecture of the book puts into our hands a perspective on marriage and society followed by the treatment of a wide range of sexuality-related issues in The Old Testament, The New Testament, The Early Church and The Reformation. We see how we have inherited perspectives of integrity from earlier generations. We see also the shifting sands of history and the advances in understanding of the environment of our debates that simply were not there before. These are set out in the second section which addresses Contraception, Divorce and Homosexuality in the Anglican Communion. To this is then added an Anglican toolkit of Scripture, Tradition and Reason in order to facilitate our decision making.

Each section concludes with question and discussion areas for reflecting on the material presented. This enables and requires us to engage with the evidential information in front of us in a way that is both dispassionate and compassionate. There is the opportunity to use the question areas for personal or for group work. As some of these issues are of particular concern to people of faith on an individual basis, the book could well be used by someone on a personal retreat who wanted to reflect on these ultimately insoluble issues in a way that is guided but never forced.

Two details are of importance in this book. The use of The

Virginia Report along with the properly nuanced understanding of the now iconic ‘Lambeth I.10’ as being not about homosexuality but about unity in the storm-tossed Anglican Communion enable us to understand why Kenneth Kearon is the correct person to write this book. His own intellectual interests are in philosophy and in ethics. He has parochial and diocesan experience combined with chaplaincy and being Director of The Irish School of Ecumenics. This he followed by being Secretary General of The Anglican Communion and bishop of Limerick and Killaloe.

Significantly the book moves us from information and activism to identity and generosity – who we are as Anglicans. It does so by asking us: What can we do with and for others? rather than solely: What can we do for ourselves? This is because the heartbeat of Anglicanism is the common good and this book captures this motivation in exemplary fashion.

MICHAEL JACKSON, Archbishop of Dublin  
April 2025

## 1. Introduction

The body of literature on Christian attitudes to marriage and close relationships is vast and growing all the time, so some justification should be offered for yet another publication in this field.

Anyone seeking to be informed on issues in this area faces a bewildering array of books and articles, so the intention is to outline a path through some of the background material and current debates on marriage and relationships, written from the perspective of someone who is an Anglican, a member of the Church of Ireland, and who has watched the engagement between faith, society and culture in the area of personal relationships.

Anglicans, sometimes to the frustration of some non-Anglicans, do not seek or require unanimity or obedience to one authority or another on issues such as these, and instead place strong emphasis on personal responsibility in moral decision-making, which conversely requires respect and tolerance for those who in sincerity decide differently. Given the need for personal decision, this book aims to provide a brief overview of some of the material, discussions and debates, and so help to resource the individual seeking to find their own way forward on some issues in this area.

This book is in three sections: the first begins by looking at marriage in modern society, and then looks at biblical and historical material that has shaped and continues to shape Christian attitudes, and to which reference is regularly made in modern discussions and debates. The Bible is clearly basic in all of this, but what exactly does it say? And does what it says chime with Christian moral values and behaviour today?

What about the writings of saints, the decisions of councils, the debates of the reformers, all of whom often spoke about relationships? What did they say? And what significance does what they said have for today's moral questions and dilemmas?

In the second part of the book, we look at two familiar issues in the area of relationships which faced Christian churches in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – contraception and divorce. Churches have had a lot to say on each of these topics, and it is instructive to follow how each was addressed in a way that respected and engaged the Christian tradition and enabled Anglicans including the Church of Ireland to reach a consensus which has proved acceptable to most church members.

The third section of the book looks at the issue of homosexuality, which is proving to be very difficult and often divisive in parts of the church today. Some Anglican churches are exploring approaches in response to requests for prayers, blessings or marriage for same-sex couples which they hope will provide a way forward, though as yet no proposal has received widespread acceptance across a majority of Anglican churches. The section concludes by identifying some of the markers which may help church members to reach a personal decision.

Throughout there is an emphasis on personal decisions in this whole area, so at the end of each chapter is a section entitled 'For Reflection and Discussion'. The hope is that at each stage the reader, either alone or in a group, will take some time to reflect on what's been read, and so make this a personal exploration into some issues in Christian ethics.

## 2. Marriage and Society

As we begin to look at marriage in some detail, there are some facts we should bear in mind as we begin this study.

The first is that marriage is not an exclusively Christian institution. Marriage existed in Palestine long before Jesus; it exists in Muslim and Hindu societies, and atheists and agnostics show much the same inclination to marry as Christians do.

This very obvious, though sometimes overlooked, fact has one important implication. Marriage is a social institution, one on which churches may have views and opinions, but it is not a Christian possession. In this sense marriage is unlike baptism or the eucharist. So strictly speaking, we should talk of a Christian understanding of marriage or Christian ideals within marriage, but not Christian marriage, unless we wish to claim (as some do) that there is a clear distinction between Christian marriage and other marriage.

This is the way the early church saw it. Early Christians were faced with marriage as it existed in the society around them, and their role was to encourage Christian values within marriage. Bringing marriage under church control was a gradual process, not completed until the 11th century.

In looking at marriage today we can therefore begin by looking at its role in modern society, a role which has been shaped and influenced by centuries of Christian tradition, but which also exists today independent of what the churches have to say about it.

Some years ago, a Church of England report<sup>1</sup> identified some

---

<sup>1</sup> *Marriage Divorce and the Church* (London, 1971), pp 15-23

features of marriage which contribute to the well-being of society as a whole by meeting certain needs. These are the need for sexual fulfilment, for maturing of personality, and for children. These can provide a basis for our exploration of marriage in society.

(a) Sexual Fulfilment. Marriage is the normal context for the maturing of the adult sexually. Of course it is not the only context, nor is it any more always the first context for an individual. In modern society it is not unusual especially for young people to explore sexual expression with a number of partners. These explorations can take various forms - overt sexual experiments, casual sexual encounters, or longer relationships - but gradually very many wish to focus this expression on one other person, and see marriage as the appropriate context. Sexual exclusiveness is a widespread expectation in marriage, and infidelity by one partner is usually interpreted by the other as a betrayal.

The term 'sexual fulfilment' means something more than just 'sexual activity'. 'Sexual activity' refers to sexual intercourse and the physical activity associated with sex. 'Sexual fulfilment' places sexual activity within the wider context of the human personality. Intercourse is an enjoyable physical act, but it is also a way of expressing love between two people.

'Love' is a difficult word to define, but in this context it includes the total commitment of one person to another. That happens at different levels - physical, mental, spiritual (in the sense of the reaching out of one person from the depth or soul of one's being to another). At its best it involves the re-shaping of one's life around another person.

Sexual intercourse can be the physical expression of this very deep relationship between two people, such that one has no desire or need for a similar relationship with anyone else. It is in this sense that sexual intercourse becomes sexual fulfilment. In popular

language it is the difference between 'having sex with someone' and 'making love'. When two people misunderstand each other's motives, when one simply wants physical satisfaction and the other is looking for a deeper and longer relationship, the latter will often complain of 'having been used' by the other, and of feeling demeaned and devalued.

It is the potential for sexual activity to become sexual fulfilment that is a distinguishing feature of human sexuality. The recognition that the powerful sex drive can be the vehicle for expressing this special commitment of one person to another which we call love marks out human from animal sexual behaviour. Yet we must also acknowledge that some sexual activity can be used to express power, dominance and exploitation of one person by another.

So sexual fulfilment is a feature of marriage, and though not exclusive to marriage, it is an important feature and expectation within it.

(b) Maturing of Personality. One of the insights coming from the field of psychology and the rapid growth of counselling associated with it is the importance of relationships in our personal development and make-up. Very many of the problems brought to counsellors today have their origins beyond the individual who presents with the problem, and frequently those origins lie in broken or failed relationships. In this, one's closest relationships are the most important, especially those with one's parents, with one's spouse/partner, and with one's children.

We are all very aware of the important relationship between mother and child called bonding which is established even before birth, and of the importance of the father's sharing in this with the newborn baby. Trust, security, the feeling of being wanted and loved, are very important in a child's early development.

Growing up involves learning to be independent of one's parents