

Sexuality and informal authority in the Church of England

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Abstract

This represents a five-year ethnographic study of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender clergy in the Church of England. Using participant observation and interviews, this research examines the sociological dimension of the church's policies regarding clerical sexuality, specifically the relationship between the church's official policy, which bars those in same-gender sexual relationships from ordained ministry, and the observation that a significant number of clergy fall into this category. The primary effect is a culture of deep institutional uncertainty. Clergy employ a range of strategies to reconcile with church policy, safeguard partnerships and maintain secure professional relationships. On the institutional side, supervisors negotiate responsibility to church policy, pastoral responsibilities to clergy and public perception. Ultimately, the tensions between these various roles are negotiated between clergy and supervisors in informal relationships which often employ covert uses of power and authority.

Keywords

Church of England, clergy, ethnography, institutional legitimacy, sexuality, transgender

You'd find very few people are saying, you need to weed out all gay clergy and sack them, because you'd lose a lot of people. (Richard, a curate, 2012)

This represents the culmination of five years' ethnographic research, undertaken between 2010 and 2015, on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) clergy in the Church of England. It begins with the observation that there is an open secret at the heart of the church's discourse on sexuality: policy often does not match practice. Despite the church's policy that clergy may not engage in

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same-gender sexual relationships, many clergy do. Many of these clergy are in long-term partnerships and married. Moreover, this is widely known by colleagues and bishops. If the situation is such that *everybody knows that everybody knows* that policy does not match practice, what is the sociological reality for the church? How do LGBTQ clergy cultivate professional security? How do bishops, Diocesan Directors of Ordinands (DDOs) and others in roles of responsibility negotiate between pastoral responsibilities and church policy? At all levels, there is a sense of deep institutional uncertainty¹ which generates both anxiety, as well as novel beliefs and practices.

Methods

This research uses ten semi-structured qualitative interviews, ten informal interviews and countless conversations and participant observations from between 2011 and 2015. As ethnography, this research analyses the personal accounts of informants, and does not necessarily represent the views of the author. Interviewees were recruited using snowball recruiting, where informants recruited new interviewees from their social and professional networks. Interviewees were also selected to capture a range of ages, career stages, spiritual traditions and political views. Because of the recruiting methodology, certain demographics have greater representation; however, all gender and career stage demographics are represented. Interviews were anonymous and confidential, so names and identifying information have been altered. The table below disaggregates significant interviews and conversations which have been foundational for this research.

Interviews:	Position		Gender	
	Candidates	1	Men	16
	Ordinands	2	Women	4
	Curates	2		
	Parish Priests	4		
	Sector Ministers	6		
	Bishops	2		
	Lay	2		
	DDO	1		
	Total:	20		

Ordination

If you're going through a discernment process, if you think you might want to be ordained, you might want to be economical with the truth. (Alan, a bishop, 2013)

The ordination process, wherein the Church of England evaluates, interviews and educates prospective clergy, is often the first time that candidates directly encounter church policy on sexuality. It is also when there is the greatest scrutiny of clergy sexuality. In practice, candidates describe complex negotiations between sexuality and church policy and advisors describe conflict between their pastoral and gate-keeping roles.

Diocesan Director of Ordinands and Issues in Human Sexuality

The first institutional step for anyone seeking ordination in the Church of England is to contact the Diocesan Director of Ordinands (DDO). This person evaluates whether an individual is a suitable candidate for ordination. *Issues in Human Sexuality*,² the church's guiding document on clerical sexuality, bars clergy from same-gender sexual relationships. Each candidate for ordination must sign a document stating that they understand the church's teachings on sexuality.

Most informants described their experiences positively, with DDOs counselling them as to how they might negotiate the ordination process. Richard, currently a curate, describes such an experience with his DDO:

she said . . . if you were to tell me now, that you were in an actively gay relationship I'd have to say, sorry goodbye. She was phrasing that, such that even if I wasn't in an actively gay relationship at that time, and if I had been, she was encouraging me not to tell her. (Richard, 2012)

Richard's case is not isolated, as many informants stated that their DDOs implicitly expressed that they did not wish to know about a candidate's current sexual relationships.

Though one might assume that LGBTQ candidates in same-gender relationships assent to church policy cynically, most informants described engaging in an interpretative process. Some LGBTQ candidates were either celibate or attempted celibacy at the time that they signed the document. One informant broadened his interpretation to a larger ethical framework. Anthony, an ordinand, states

It's quite hopeful. *Issues in Human Sexuality* ultimately affirms that gay people are Christian, and only objects to homosexuality for practical reasons, so as society changes, those practical reasons become irrelevant. (Anthony, 2013)

Some candidates described their attitudes changing during the candidacy process. Anthony, who had emphasized the social justice potential of *Issues*, ultimately decided to lie when he signed the document. Ben, a curate, describes how his first spiritual director advised him to withdraw before his interviews because lying would 'destroy him spiritually' (Ben, 2011). After withdrawing, he discovered that his spiritual director was a closeted gay man. Ben entered the discernment process again and signed the document as a then-single person, though he now has

a partner. Faced with this dilemma, some candidates continue the process uncertain of how they will cope. ‘They don’t ask us to sign onto the creeds or the Thirty-Nine Articles, but they ask us to sign this,’ says Simon, an aspirant who was uncertain about entering the discernment process, but has since passed his Bishop’s Advisory Panel (Simon, 2013).

Bishop’s Advisory Panel

If the DDO recommends the candidate forward, the next step is the Bishop’s Advisory Panel (BAP), a battery of individual and group interviews and exercises. Though the criteria for selection do not include sexual relationships and, in fact, interviewer guidelines state that they should not enquire about sexuality without considerable extenuating circumstances,³ many report that they were asked indirect questions regarding relationships. Daniel, a parish priest, recalls that single candidates were sometimes asked whether they were in relationships. If someone was gender nonconforming, he says, they were more likely to be asked (Daniel, 2012).

Theological college

Having completed the BAP, candidates, in consultation with their bishops, select theological colleges for ordination training.⁴ The majority of informants attended one theological college with a historically substantial population of gay, lesbian and bisexual and, at times, transgender ordinands. For purposes of this study, it will be called ‘College 1’. Other interviewees attend or have attended a more traditionally conservative theological college, ‘College 2’.

As early as the 1970s, College 1 has implicitly and explicitly supported its gay ordinands, with one vice-principal coming out in the 1970s. While informants who attended at that time typically did not disclose their sexual identities to tutors, more recently tutors have become a resource for LGBTQ ordinands, especially in finding placements. Ben’s tutor helped him compile a list of dioceses with gay-friendly bishops. Moreover, the culture of the college tends to be gay friendly. In chapel, when prayers are said for ordinands and their partners, long-term same-gender partners are included. However, the college will not house same-gender partners of ordinands in college, so same-sex couples in civil partnerships must live out. Despite these ambivalences, informants report finding the culture nurturing. Richard states: ‘[students] find it very hard when they arrive in a parish which isn’t so straightforwardly accepting, when they’ve been nurtured in a context where it’s absolutely fine’ (Richard, 2013).

Informants at more conservative theological colleges describe more mixed experiences. Anthony attends College 2 where he enjoys the personal support of friends and his tutor. ‘They’ve been supportive of me as a person, but less so when I’m objectified into an idea’ (Anthony, 2015). However, during block teaching on sexuality, one of his fellow ordinands stated ‘I don’t know if I can pastorally care for people if I don’t agree with their lifestyles’ (Anthony, 2015).

Relationships

An older priest was telling me that some of his friends who he knows from the gay scene think it's boring now, because it doesn't have the same kind of exciting deviance, subversiveness that it used to have. But most of my friends at [College 1]... from a vaguely liberal catholic tradition would be looking for a long-term relationship. (Richard, 2013)

Of the five LGBTQ informants still in training, either as candidates, ordinands or curates, four are currently in long-term relationships and all five aspire to marriage. The demographics shift in interviews with older clergy, with more identifying as single. This perhaps points to a generational shift, where the legal acceptance of LGBTQ marriage has shifted the relationship aspirations of younger clergy.

Officially, the ordination process should only advance LGBTQ candidates who commit to celibacy. In practice, advisors encourage candidates not to disclose sexual relationships and training is ambivalent about its acceptance of LGBTQ identities. While interviewees attempted to reconcile with church policy, some ordinands describe feeling disconnected from pastoral and peer relationships. The trend, however, appears to be towards greater support of LGBTQ ordinands as well as more ordinands aspiring to marriage.

Clergy

As ordained clergy take on their ministries, there is often less scrutiny of one's sexual life, but the isolation from pastoral care that begins in the ordination process can become problematic for both individual clergy and the larger institutional church. At this point, disclosure of sexual identity can provide protection, social networks and pastoral care, but it also creates vulnerability. Many LGBTQ clergy work in sector ministry, citing greater discrimination protections.⁵

Mental health

There is an old clergy culture that's kind of dying, which is very split really, from a psychological perspective, and I know a number of people in this situation, clergy who would be very conservative in their outward appearance, in their practice. I'm talking about Anglo-Catholic clergy. They'll be opposed to the ordination of women and the lot, and who would present to the world as celibate, but in fact lead quite promiscuous sex lives, including saunas and that kind of stuff. That's an older culture in a way, becomes it comes from a time where repression was much more explicit. Even in society, that's what much more of the gay world would be like... (Richard, 2013)

The apparent dissonance between publicly conservative views and private behaviour might be described as *splitting*, a concept developed by Richard Fairburn to

explain the inability of a person to integrate the positive and negative aspects of the self into a coherent whole. Alan Downs, applying this concept to the experiences of many gay men, describes splitting as a coping mechanism whereby a person, overwhelmed by shame, fabricate an identity in reaction to a disavowed segment of self.⁶ In this case, LGBTQ clergy present as conservative in one life and sexually promiscuous in another.

Splitting has both pastoral and institutional consequences. Those who are unable to reconcile the tensions in their personal and professional lives are vulnerable to a range of negative outcomes including mental health problems and substance abuse. Moreover, because clergy have been encouraged not to disclose same-gender relationships, they may not find pastoral support in the church. According to Ben, the real issue in the church is alcoholism (Ben, 2011), and many clergy describe colleagues who engage in problem drinking. Splitting creates demonstrably problematic behaviours – so why, if church policy supports celibate same-gender relationships, do clergy psychologically split in the first place? Clergy are not meant to be questioned about their sexual activities, unless they become candidates for consecration⁷, so why hide one's identity or relationships? Informants report that individuals within the church have policed LGBTQ identity through implicit and informal means.

Gender

According to informants, gender discrimination represents a covert form of LGBTQ discrimination in the church and disproportionately affects historically marginalized groups. Many informants believe that women in same-gender relationships experience higher rates of employment discrimination than their male counterparts. Ben's colleague, a woman with a same-gender partner, was unable to secure a curacy after completing theological college (Ben, 2011). Due to a dearth of statistical information, this may be anecdotal. However, as not securing a curacy is rare, it may be explained by double discrimination, wherein one experiences discrimination on the basis of gender as well as sexuality.

In the course of this research, informants recurrently described a particular group of clergy: 'the gin and lace brigade' (Alan, 2013) and 'sauna by night, father fierce by day' (Richard, 2013). Effeminacy was often freighted in the critique of hypocrisy. This category, 'the gin and lace brigade'⁸ is not an identity that any informant claimed, but may represent an *abject* category. For Kristeva, the abject represents aspects of the self which are considered taboo, even threatening, to one's sense of self.⁹ Social theorists have described this phenomenon as the good gay/bad gay dichotomy, wherein acceptance of LGBTQ identity is contingent on the rejection of certain traits, typically gender nonconformity.¹⁰ This can further manifest as discrimination against transgender people, whose gender alterity is often visible to colleagues and superiors.

Transgender clergy described high rates of discrimination, despite there being no explicit bar to transgender clergy in Church of England policy. While some clergy,

such as Carol Stone, have transitioned in ministry with the support of their bishops, others describe more contentious experiences. One informant, Fiona, was asked to surrender her Permission to Officiate (PTO) when she decided to transition (Fiona, 2013). There are currently no transmasculine or genderqueer ordained clergy in the Church of England, so all transgender clergy are feminine-of-centre. It is possible that the confluence of gender discrimination against women and the policing of perceived male femininity renders this group particularly vulnerable.

Partnerships

According to Church of England policy, clergy may have same-gender partners and may enter civil partnerships, so long as they commit to celibacy and do not marry. In practice, however, clergy say that the church's acceptance of same-gender partnerships is more ambivalent.

James has always disclosed his partnerships to bishops: 'I'll never ever work under a bishop who doesn't know the story. Because it's pointless. You end up spending your whole life looking over your shoulder' (James, 2012). On the other hand, Matthew's bishop refused to renew his PTO after he entered into a civil partnership (Matthew, 2011). While James's bishops have been supportive, Matthew was disciplined for a partnership that conforms to the church's guidelines. As such, despite the church's nominal acceptance of clergy civil partnerships, the outcome of entering one is uncertain. Some clergy respond to this uncertainty either by informing bishops with the hope of minimizing later repercussions, though the revocation of Matthew's PTO illustrates its risks. Others choose not to disclose these relationships, which potentially leads to splitting, fear of disclosure and disciplinary action. Out of five informants in active ministry, three have long-term partners and all said they knew other clergy with long-term, same-gender partners. Though the church has barred clergy from entering same-gender marriages, several informants have married. Additionally, one informant who identifies as heterosexual officiated at a same-gender wedding.

Bishops

Though bishops will publicly support the church's official policy on sexuality, in practice informants describe both supportive and difficult experiences with bishops. James recalls one dinner with his bishop, shortly before his partner passed away from AIDS-related complications.

Because he knew about [my partner] being ill, he said, 'I want to give you my blessing.' So he gave us his blessing very privately in our dining room . . . And then the current Bishop of ——— turned up and he just walked in, he didn't say anything and just sat down. And he said, 'There's the most extraordinary atmosphere of peace in this room.' (James, 2012)

Many bishops, regardless of their political orientation, will support clergy in same-gender relationships. Alan, a bishop, describes how such bishops are constrained from publicly supporting their LGBTQ clergy:

As a bishop, I have to think how that would be heard in the width of the church and particularly in the church who would find that strongly antithetic to the Christian gospel as they understand it. I have to live my role as teacher not to say so strongly, this is what I think, but to help people think through the implications of their faith and what's in the scriptures and the application in the present day. (Alan, 2013)

While many clergy describe privately supportive relationships with bishops, some describe instances of bishops abusing authority. When Fiona informed her bishop about her impending transition, he attempted to revoke her licence:

[He said], 'I've read your file, it's a fantastic file, but I'm very sorry I can't support you. I think what you're doing is incompatible with ministry, and I want you to surrender your licence.' And I said, 'Well what if I don't surrender the licence.' He said, 'We would be able to withdraw the licence.' And I said 'Yes, but would you withdraw the licence?' And he wouldn't comment on that (Fiona 2013).

Fiona did not surrender her licence and sought legal advice. Later, she reports, the bishop admitted that she was right not to surrender her licence.

Final remarks

Many clergy report that they find support from their bishops, regardless of political orientation; however, others have difficult experiences. Moreover, because there is little, if any, adherence to church policy, there is often little oversight on the actions of those in authority, which informants describe as pastorally supportive or problematic. Bishops also report having trouble because they must both maintain a policy that is widely ignored, both by their conservative and progressive colleagues, yet must be vigilant that the church does not appear publicly hypocritical. This is one reason for the policing of visible nonconformity, such as gender alterity and partnerships. Some clergy with sufficient structural privileges cultivate professional security, but others, particularly female and transgender clergy, have a more difficult time finding security.

Further research

While this research has discussed clergy and the institutional church as if they were separate entities, in fact they are one church. Some of those affected by the church's policy also shape that policy, and ideological opponents of LGBTQ clergy in practice provide them with support and pastoral care. Resisting the temptation to

essentialize this as a ‘debate’, and instead focusing on more diffuse relationships and practices, one finds a common thread: practice does not match policy. All actors therefore face the possibility of scandal, the public disclosure of this disconnect. According to Castells,

Scandal . . . has two kinds of effects on the political system. First, it may . . . weaken the credibility of those subjected to scandal. However, this kind of effect varies in its impact. Sometimes, it provokes . . . indifference among the public.¹¹

What is at stake is no less than the public legitimacy of the Church of England. So long as the public policy and private conduct of the church remain disconnected as informants report, discrimination will persist, there will be mistrust in pastoral relationships, the church will be vulnerable to scandal and all parties may continue losing public credibility. As such, sexuality is not simply the problem of LGBTQ clergy, but represents a diffuse, ever-negotiating system of formal and informal practices between institutional actors who are uncertain of the outcome.

Notes

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