How homonegative is the typical Anglican congregation? Applying the Robbins-Murray Religious Homonegative Orientation Scale (RHOS)

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ABSTRACT

This paper set out to assess and profile attitudes toward homosexuality within one typical Anglican congregation. The majority of attendees (n=65, 42% men and 58% women) completed the Robbins-Murray Religious Homonegative Orientation Scale (an instrument embracing the following views on homosexuality: theological aspects, normativity, moral judgement, legal proscription, and affective response), together with indices concerned with demographic factors, religious factors and personality factors. Overall, the data demonstrated that the majority of churchgoers did not espouse a negative view of homosexuality. More proscriptive attitudes were associated with being male, with being older, with regular attendance, and with being more conservative. Individual differences in personality, however, were not significant predictors of views on homosexuality.

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes to the outsider the question of homosexuality must appear to be the issue that both unites and divides the Anglican Communion in general and the Church of England in particular (Village and Francis, 2008). The question of homosexuality unites the Church of England in the sense that everyone seems to be concerned with the issue, but it divides the Church of England in the sense that there are radically divergent views on the issue. At the same time surprisingly little seems to be known about what the average churchgoer in the average Anglican pew has to say on the issue. The aim of the present study is to go and to listen.

Anglican churchgoers, of course, are unlikely to live in a social vacuum. Attitudes toward homosexuality have become increasingly tolerant in Western societies over the last few decades (Avery *et al*. 2007; Crockett and Voas 2003; Loftus 2001; Steffens and Wagner 2004). The growing acceptance of homosexuality in Britain has been documented by Crocket and Voas (2003) using the data from the British Social Attitudes and British Household Panel surveys from 1983 to 2000. Over this period, the proportion of the population that believed sexual relations between two adults of the same sex are always wrong fell from around 50% to 37%. There were marked differences with sex and age: men and older people being generally more disapproving than women or younger people. These findings mirror those found in other surveys (Hayes 1995; Johnson *et al*. 1997; Kite and Whitley 1996) suggesting that sex and age are stable predictors of attitudes toward homosexuality in most populations.

These changes in attitudes in society at large have inevitably led to diversity and disputes in many church denominations, where traditional prohibitions on homosexual behaviour clash with more liberal views (Bates 2004; Church of England 1991; Coulton 2005; Guy 2006; Petersen 1998; Yip and Keenan 2004). Opinion is divided as to whether the growing acceptance of homosexuality in society at large should be adopted or rejected by Christians. For some it represents a capitulation to sinful permissiveness; for others it is a

welcome response to an overdue social acceptance of fundamental differences in individual sexual preferences.

The Anglican Communion has found the issue of homosexuality particularly difficult (Bates 2004). The traditional and stated position of the Anglican Church has been to accept the fact of homosexual orientation but reject homosexual practice, as expressed in resolution 1.10 on *Human Sexuality* of the 1998 Lambeth Conference. This 'homophile' view is sometimes stated as 'loving the sinner but hating the sin'. This position is now seen as unduly conservative in some quarters. There has also been a widespread and fierce debate about the acceptability or otherwise of allowing practising homosexuals to be priests or bishops (Atherstone 2004; Bates 2004; Eames 2004; Markham 2007).

One recent attempt to listen to the views of Anglican churchgoers on the question of homosexuality was reported by Village and Francis (2008). This study drew on the findings of the *Church Times Survey* conducted in 2001 and reported initially by Francis, Robbins and Astley (2005). The strength of the *Church Times Survey* is that it profiled the views of over 7,000 people who were regular worshippers at Anglican churches in England. The weakness of the *Church Times Survey* is that it would be misleading to assume that the readership of this church paper necessarily represents the views of all Anglican churchgoers.

Since the *Church Times Survey* had been established to profile the views of Anglican clergy and laity over a wide range of topics, it had been possible to include only a few items relevant to the question of homosexuality. Three of these items were phrased in a homopositive direction: I am in favour of the ordination of practising homosexuals as priest; I am in favour of the ordination of practising homosexuals as bishops; and homosexual couples should have the right to marry one another. The fourth item was phrased in a homonegative direction: it is wrong for people of the same gender to have sex together. With the homopositive items reverse coded, all four items cohered to

produce a unidimensional and internally reliable index of homonegativity with an alpha coefficient of .93 (Cronbach, 1951).

Two main conclusions emerged from the analysis of these data provided by Village and Francis (2008). The first conclusion confirmed a high level of homonegativity among the Anglican churchgoers. Only around one in four were in favour of the ordination of practising homosexuals as priests (26%) and fewer were in favour of the ordination of practising homosexuals as bishops (22%). The proportion fell to 14% who supported the view that homosexual couples should have the right to marry one another. At the same time, 56% maintained that it is wrong for people of the same gender to have sex together.

The second conclusion from the analysis provided by Village and Francis (2008) confirmed that variations in Anglicans' attitudes toward homosexuality could be predicted from three sets of variables concerned with basic demographics, with theological position, and with personality.

In terms of basic demographics, the *Church Times Survey* included information about age and sex. The findings among churchgoers mirrored these in society at large: in this study men and older people were more homonegative than women and younger people, which was consistent with the findings reported, for example, by Crocket and Voas (2003), Hayes (1995), Johnson *et al* (1997) and Kite and Whittey (1996). Such findings suggest that Anglican churchgoers as a whole may become less homonegative as the older generation is progressively replaced by younger people and as the ratio in congregations between men and women continues to widen in favour of women.

In terms of personality variables, the *Church Times Survey* included the abbreviated form of the Revised Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Francis, Brown and Philipchalk, 1992) that provides measures of extraversion, neuroticism, psychoticism and social desirability. Two of these measures (the psychoticism scale and the index of social desirability) both added additional

predictive power, after taking age and sex into account, but the proportion of variance accounted for was not large.

In terms of theological position, the *Church Times Survey* included the three measures established by Randall (2005) and designed to distinguish between three orientations: liberal versus conservative, catholic versus evangelical, and charismatic versus non-charismatic. All three measures proved to be highly significant. Among these three measures, after taking sex and age into account, the most significant predictor of homonegativity was conservative theological orientation. After allowing for the effect of conservatism, evangelicalism also had a highly significant effect on homonegativity. This suggests that evangelical disapproval of homosexuality may be more than simply a product of moral conservatism. Those who scored themselves as positively charismatic were also more likely to disapprove of homosexuality, even after allowing for the effects of other two church orientations. So even though charismatics were more likely to be conservative and evangelical, there seemed to be some other reason why they were generally against homosexuality.

Against this background, the aim of the present study is to build on the work of Francis and Village (2008) in two ways: by proposing a more nuanced measure of homonegativity and by testing this measure within a typical Anglican congregation.

A review of a range of measures employed in previous research concerned with homonegativity among church-related groups (see for example, Veenvliet, 2008) identified five main themes that could be characterised as theological aspects, views of normativity, moral judgments, legal proscriptions, and affective responses. From a wide choice of potential items, the following themes were selected for testing. Two items explored theological aspects: homosexuality is a sin; God intended some people to be homosexual. Two items explored views of normativity: homosexuality is unnatural; a committed relationship between two people of the same is abnormal. Two items explored moral judgment: sex between two men is wrong; sex between two women is

wrong. One item explored legal proscription: homosexuality should be illegal. Two items explored affective responses: homosexual couples make me feel uncomfortable; I would feel uncomfortable entering a lesbian or gay event.

METHOD

Sample

All those over the age of eighteen (and younger participants with permission from their parents or guardians) attending a mid-morning service at a suburban Anglican church in the diocese of Manchester were invited to complete a five-page questionnaire. Nearly all the congregation accepted the invitation. The sample (N=65) comprised 42% males and 58% females. Nearly half (46%) were aged between 40 and 69 years of age, 35% were under the age of 40, and 19% were aged 70 or over.

Measures

Attitude toward homosexuality was measured by the newly proposed nine-item Robbins-Murray Religious Homonegative Orientation Scale (RHOS). Each item was assessed on a five-point scale: agree strongly, agree, not certain, disagree and disagree strongly.

Personality was assessed by the Francis Psychological Type Scales (FPTS) (Francis, 2005). This instrument proposes four ten-item measures, distinguishing between: extraversion and introversion; sensing and intuition; thinking and feeling; judging and perceiving. Each item presents a forced choice between two options.

Church orientation was measured on three bipolar scales (Randall, 2005). Participants were asked to assess how catholic or evangelical and how liberal or conservative they are by locating themselves on a seven-point scale. They were also asked to assess if they had been influenced positively or negatively by the charismatic movement on a seven-point scale.

Church attendance was assessed by a single item concerned with frequency on a seven-point scale: less than once a year, at least once a year, at least six times a year, at least once a month, at least twice a month, weekly, more than once a week.

Prayer was assessed by a single item concerned with frequency on a five-point scale: never, occasionally, at least once a month, at least once a week, nearly every day.

Data analysis

The data were analysed by SPSS, employing the following routines: frequency, reliability and correlations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents the item rest of test correlations and the item

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endorsement (the sum of agree strongly and agree responses) for the nine items of the Robbins-Murray Religious Homonegative Orientation Scale (RHOS), together with the alpha coefficient (Cronbach, 1951). The item rest of test correlations and the alpha coefficient confirm the high internal consistency reliability of the instrument. The item endorsement demonstrates that homonegative views are expressed by around one-third of these churchgoers. Thus, 32% say that sex between two men is wrong and 26% say that sex between two women is wrong; 29% take the view that homosexuality is unnatural and 17% take the view that a committed relationship between people of the same sex is abnormal. One in five of these churchgoers conceptualise homosexuality as a sin (19%), but fewer than one in ten believe that homosexuality should be illegal (8%). Around one in three of these churchgoers would feel uncomfortable entering a lesbian or gay event (35%), but the proportion falls to one in five who say that homosexual couples make them feel uncomfortable (22%). The homopositive statement that God intended some people to be homosexual was endorsed by 35% of these churchgoers.

Table 2 presents the correlation coefficients examining the association

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between RHOS scores and four sets of predictor variables: demographic factors, religious practice, church orientation, and psychological type. The asterisks indicate those associations that are statistically significant.

In terms of demographic factors, the two well-established findings found in society at large (see Crocket and Voas, 2003) have been reaffirmed among this church congregation. Male churchgoers reported higher levels of homonegativity in comparison with female churchgoers. Older churchgoers reported higher levels of homonegativity in comparison with younger churchgoers. In this sense churchgoers clearly reflect the society of which they are part.

In terms of religious practice, there is a significant association between frequency of church attendance and homonegativity. The more frequent attendees reported higher levels of homonegativity in comparison with less frequent attendees. This finding suggests that the liberalisation of attitudes toward homosexuality may be association with loosening ties with the church community. Personal religious practice in the form of personal prayer was not associated with individual differences in levels of homonegativity.

In terms of church orientation, within this one Anglican congregation personal preferences on either the catholic and evangelical continuum or on the pro-charismatic and anti-charismatic continuum were not predictive of levels of homonegativity. On the other hand, personal preference on the conservative and liberal continuum were predictive of levels of homonegativity. Conservative churchgoers reported higher levels of homonegativity in comparison with liberal churchgoers.

In terms of psychological type, no significant associations were found between these personality variables and levels of homonegativity.

CONCLUSION

Against the background of the considerable controversy in the Church of England regarding the question of homosexuality, the present study set out to examine the views one typical Anglican congregation. Three main conclusions emerged from this study.

The first conclusion concerns ways of assessing attitude toward homosexuality within a church-related context. The Robbins-Murray Religious Homonegativity Scale (RHOS) identified nine items reflecting five themes characterised as theological aspects, views of normativity, moral judgments, legal proscriptions, and affective responses. The data analysis demonstrated that these nine-items functioned as a homogenous unidimensional scale, achieving an alpha coefficient in excess of .90. This instrument can, therefore, be confidently commended for further use.

The second conclusion concerns the levels of homonegativity displayed by this one typical Anglican congregation. The data suggest that, overall, there may be three groups of churchgoers representing roughly equal proportions of the congregation. One third is clearly homopositive, with 35% agreeing that God intended some people to be homosexual. One third is clearly homonegative, with 32% agreeing that sex between two men is wrong. The remaining third is likely to have retained an open mind on the issue, either being confused by the complexity of the debate or actively seeking to discern the will of God. In this context the door remains wide open to the influence of campaigning factions or to wider programmes of theological study and religious reflection.

The third conclusion concerns the factors that predict individual differences in levels of homonegativity among churchgoers. According to these data, personality variables are trivial compared with demographic factors, religious practice, and church orientation. On the one hand, demographic factors demonstrate that churchgoers reflect the society of which they are part. As the younger cohort of churchgoers bring with them the more liberal attitudes of their secular peers, so levels of homonegativity within the church are likely to

decline. On the other hand, factors concerned with religious practice and church orientation demonstrate that the church retains significant hold over its members. Those most committed to frequent attendance are those least likely to espouse more liberal attitudes. Those most committed to a broadly conservative perspective on their faith are least likely to abandon a conservative perspective on homosexuality. In this sense homonegativity remains part of a broader view of what defines conservative rather than liberal belief in the Church of England.

There are significant limitations with the present study in that the findings have been based on the snapshot of a just one Anglican congregation. The study deserves wider replication across a broad cross-section of Anglican churches, as well as churches associated with other denominations. To that end the authors would be interested in hearing from colleagues interested in extending their work.

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Table 1 The Robbins-Murray Religious Homonegative Orientation Scale (RHOS): item rest of test correlations and item endorsement

	r	%
Homosexuality is a sin	.80	19
God intended some people to be homosexual	.51	35
Homosexuality is unnatural	.82	29
A committed relationship between people of the same sex is abnormal	.80	17
Sex between two men is wrong	.69	32
Sex between two women is wrong	.75	26
Homosexuality should be illegal	.66	8
Homosexual couples make me feel uncomfortable	.64	22
I would feel uncomfortable entering a lesbian or gay event	.64	35
alpha	.91	

Table 2 Predictors of individual differences in RHOS scores

	r
demographic factors	
age	+.25*
sex	-.32**
Religious practice	
church attendance	+.26*
personal prayer	+.11
Church orientation	
catholic/evangelical	-.16
liberal/conservative	+.26*
pro/anti charismatic	-.13
Psychological type	
extraversion	-.18
intuition	-.15
feeling	-.10
judging	+.22

Note: *p< .05; ** P<.01