

“Sex on the brain” (MoSAIC keynote, June 2021).

First of all let me thank you for the invitation and for the privilege of speaking to you today. It's great to be with a group of people on a journey who are learning as they go and reflecting truth to one another, as the process of this conference has shown.

The MoSAIC network is a valuable and indeed necessary part of the Church, because inclusion is a Gospel matter. Inclusion speaks of love, and inclusion is seamless.

I believe that your agenda will align the Church more closely with the life and values of Jesus. It speaks of love and of the God of love, and it is also the world's agenda - no matter what the culture warriors might shout, no matter how many people are chanting now that the things that matter to us as “woke”. In the words of Dr King, quoting Theodore Parker a century before, the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.

Being called woke has become an insult, but it is better than being asleep, and MoSAIC is a movement of wakefulness. We have all seen the growth, or re-growth, of anti-liberal philosophies in the West, and 2016 was a watershed year. For those committed to inclusion there is a work to do within and beyond the Church. And yet, in the midst of all that contention, the agenda of inclusion remains the world's agenda, and remains worth advocating, and struggling for, so that wakefulness may be the mark of God's people who are called to watch.

In the mid to late 1960s the World Council of Churches developed an understanding of mission. The soundbite that summed up their understanding was this: “Let the world set the agenda”.

For many of us in the Church, the world setting the agenda seems so faithless, because God should come first, and anyway we know we're right. How dare people who are not believers presume to tell us when and how the way we live is offensive or damaging?

But the fact is that in the areas we've been addressing - increasingly in the area of racial justice and disability justice, and overwhelmingly in this area of sexuality, as well of course as in the area of secrecy and abuse, the arc of the moral universe keeps on bending towards justice. Look at our football team, kneeling in the face of

the boos of the sleepwalkers so as to advocate for justice. The world beyond the church has set the moral agenda, and those who kneel with our footballers, or who see no difference between attending the marriage of their gay or their straight friends or work colleagues, find the community of faith to be wanting and indeed increasingly offensive. Nowhere is that more true than in the area of human sexuality.

It was Malcolm Muggeridge in the mid-1960s who famously said: “It has to be admitted that we English have sex on the brain, which is a very unsatisfactory place to have it”. I won’t go into Muggeridge’s own rather complicated journey here except to say that he knew what he was talking about.

And he was right. We English, and certainly we in the Church of England, have sex on the brain, which is a very unsatisfactory place to have it.

You don’t get to choose your agendas, and you don’t get to hide your least favourite agenda by covering it with lots of other justice cards. Inclusion is seamless. And in our generation sexuality is the agenda that the church would so love to move on from but which, inconveniently, the culture of the West and of this country uses as a touchstone for us.

On many occasions in the past, particular issues have been seen as deal-breakers for the unity of the Church. Divorce, contraception, the place of women in ministry - all these differences are now held within the Church’s unity, though they were all the last ditch in their time. And now in our generation sexuality in general, and same-sex relationships in particular, have come to be seen by some as the line that somehow God has always wanted us to draw in the sand.

But in fact the agenda of same-sex love and faithfulness and the blessing of its expression has been given to us, and certainly to me, by the world - the world which God so loved. My kids’ generation, and the generations younger than my kids which include now the youngest generation of the ordained, are bewildered and amazed that we can’t seem to stop having sex on the brain.

The mildly progressive and inclusive things that I myself have said and written on all this have been received with extraordinary generosity and gratitude by my kids’ friends and by the LGBTI+ community in the Liverpool region and beyond, and although I never asked for this agenda before I came to Liverpool, I am glad to have inhabited that space now. As I grow older and the arc of my own ministry draws close to its end, I am glad to be able to speak wholeheartedly for a vision of Christian

community that commends itself to people who honour love where it is to be found, and who want to celebrate it.

We English have sex on the brain, which is a very unsatisfactory place to have it. We also have religion on the brain, and that's no better. Having sex or religion on the brain is an awful place to have it. Few approaches have been used to crush dissent or to enforce loneliness more than the approach that says "Let's do some more theology on this. Most scholars agree...". But God made more than minds, and God is bigger than arguments. As St Gregory of Nyssa said back in the fourth century: "Concepts create idols of God, of whom only wonder can tell us anything."

So MoSAIC is a network that can help the Church to learn from its incarnate Lord and from the beauty of the body. Some of you may have heard me tell this story before, but ever since I heard it from my mentor Bishop Peter Selby, it has lived in me as a piece of Gospel truth. At the height of the AIDS crisis the Bishop of California was visited by a group of church people who demanded that he condemn what some people still call "the gay lifestyle". The bishop replied, "God took the risk of becoming a human being. Why can't you?"

The Incarnation goes beyond the life of the mind, and the balanced intellectual "debates" which educated western men in particular love so much, the clear teaching that some see as all that matters, the glittering arguments of the brain, are put in their place by the mystery of the body.

Sex partakes of the mystery of the body, and sex with its surrenders and its vulnerabilities and its comedies and its glory is a deep and profound mystery. That's why having it on the brain is a very unsatisfactory place to have it. I have used the word "debates" and the conversations that are ongoing around "Living in Love and Faith" are still described that way by some as "debates", as though we were in the Oxford Union, as though people's lives can be picked over remotely and intellectually without damage.

They can't. People's love is a mystery and their body is made by God as a mystery, and people are afraid of mysteries, and so the body is feared by those for whom the tidy mind matters most. The mystery of people's sexuality, the untidy fact that people live their lives to quirky templates, all this is implicit in the incarnation, and it makes holiness complicated and even messy - certainly messier than debate.

As Einstein said in a scientific context, "Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler". People grow up and fall in love and their mysterious

bodies lead them to love as they love, and they will love whom they love, and no amount of harrumphing is going to change that.

Of course desire itself is also a mystery. Desire is a driver and a road to holiness, or to dissipation, and Christianity has much to say about the need to move to holiness and to love, to be disciplined lovers, and to forgive one another, and to shun the selfish abuse of love.

But desire runs on the road of the body, and the body's road runs mysteriously. That's what causes fear, and fear brings with it a fog. And so people assume norms and impose norms and discipline those who differ, even though they are seeking to take the desires they have been given and to direct them well. And this is simply wrong. It's wrong.

Fear of sex stems from fear of the body, not fear of desire. And as Rowan Williams said in "The Body's Grace" in 1989, "there would be less need for LGCM and kindred organisations [including of course MoSAIC today] if sex were not alarming to so many..."

For those of us who are inclusive Christians, the risk of becoming a human being is always a risk worth taking, since Jesus went that way. And that people should live fully into who they were made to be is a delight and not a problem.

Anyway, because we still have sex on the brain in England, MoSAIC has a particular job of advocacy to do if sexuality is to be included in the basket of inclusion. No one will say, at least not explicitly, that issues of racial justice, or of disability discrimination, should in principle be overshadowed by our Christian faith or are in some way in conflict with the rights of Christian people to practice their religion.

But sexuality is in a different place, and so we need to advocate, and you yourselves need, as individuals and as an organisation, to take your place in the family of advocates and on the spectrum of advocacy.

That spectrum is wide. It includes some whose very lives are under the microscope and indeed at risk from personal and institutional homophobia and transphobia and whose anger is white-hot. We need those voices. It includes people who have been awakened to the need for greater justice because members of their family or people they know are living loves of evident holiness in same-sex or trans contexts. We need those voices. It includes moderate people who see the way society is moving and who can't see a problem with that; we need those voices. It includes corporate bodies, such as in this sector One Body One Faith, or Changing Attitude or Equal or

Open Table, or the Ozanne Foundation with which I'm linked myself, or wider-scoped advocates such as Inclusive Church or MoSAIC; and we need all those voices. And the result of wholehearted advocacy by lots of people with a wide spectrum of voices and thoughts and lived examples will be change, I hope and pray.

The arc of my own ministry is drawing near its end; I was ordained 42 years ago and I'm in my 68th year. But I want to take my place on that spectrum of advocacy, just as you do.

What do I want to see? I want to see a Church that is no longer institutionally racist. I want to see a Church where people with physical or mental or emotional disability are honoured and accommodated and learned from and loved, and whose love is received as a gift.

In the area of sexuality and relationships I want to see the road which runs through Living in Love and Faith come to a good destination. The LLF process has clarified my own thinking.

I want to see a gender-neutral marriage canon, such as they have in the Episcopal Church or in the Scottish Episcopal Church. And as a necessary but not sufficient first step I want to see conscientious freedom for the Church's ministers and local leaders to honour, recognise and, yes indeed, to bless same-sex unions whether civil partnerships or civil marriages.

I want to see an abolition of the foolishness that sees the call to ordained ministry as a call to a state morally higher than that of the baptised, as though baptism called us to a lesser holiness. I want to see an end to LGBTQ+ people hiding who they are for fear of being exposed to conversion therapy or to being forbidden to minister in churches. I want to see an end to the inquisition of ordinands about their private lives.

I want to see all this before I die. These things must be done and I hope and believe that LLF will awaken the church and open the door to them.

And I do want us to remain one church, and within that church for example I want to see the conscientious rights of conservative people preserved for them.

But I don't want any longer to see the conscientious rights of progressive people, who believe the truth of the Archbishops of Canterbury and York when they ask for a radical NEW Christian inclusion, I don't want to see their consciences ignored and explained away and overridden.

I want to see a church where those rights are liberated so that people's love can be blessed. And in the end I want to see a gender-neutral marriage canon so that the goods and joys of marriage can be extended to all and fenced around no longer.

In these fractious and increasingly authoritarian days, these post-truth days, I want to see a church that proclaims that love is love and the recognises and affirmed and blesses love where it sees it. I want to see a church that learns from the poor in spirit and the broken and the oppressed and the hungry and the grieving, just as Jesus said.

Inclusion is seamless, and I think MoSAIC understands that. So I want to see more people like you, and to encourage you, and to share with you the task of holding these values before the Church, and before the electors to the General Synod, and in the end before the world.

In my kitchen there's a tea towel from the Radical Tea Towel Company. It has a picture of the great US jurist Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and it has these words of hers: "Fight for the things that you care about. But do it in a way that will lead others to join you". Take your place with courage on the spectrum of advocacy, friends, and help to establish the coalition that sees the arc of the moral universe bend towards justice.

Thank you for the privilege of sharing with you.
