This was a difficult assignment. I gave this paper to a joint conference of the Modern Churchpeople's Union, the Centre for the Study of Christianity, and the Student Christian Movement, at the High Leigh Conference Centre in July 2006. The title of the conference was Passion for Justice. It was about the sexual issues that divide Christians and churches. I wanted to show how children have been marginalised in these ecclesial incivilities, to inquire why, and to return them to any discussion of the 'meanings' of sexuality. I hope that explains the odd title of the piece.

JUSTICE FOR CHILDREN TOO!

I am delighted that a Christian conference about sexuality should devote an entire session to children. Children are sadly neglected in theology, and in the ecclesial polemics about sexuality, yet in the teaching of Jesus they are centre-stage. In part 1 I start, familiarly enough, with the teaching of Jesus about children, and then the problems start to pile up. There is, I will suggest, a chasm between Jesus' pro-children teaching and the ambivalent adult world of the rest of the Bible and almost the whole of the Christian tradition. In part 2, I describe some of the socio-sexual changes of modern societies, together with secular and religious responses to them, arguing that non-patriarchal marriage is likely to be a better environment for raising children than others. In part 3, I affirm that having children remains one of the meanings of sexuality and embodiment for straight partners, and give weight to theological criticisms of cultural attitudes to children.

1. Jesus and Children

1.1. The Teaching of Jesus about Children. We are familiar enough with this. Mark records (in his terse economical style) 'They brought children for him to touch. The disciples rebuked them'. (Mk.10:13) The difference of approach between Jesus and his disciples to children has continued throughout the Christian tradition and haunts us even now. Jesus teaches that the Reign of God belongs to children. "The kingdom of God belongs to such as these." (Mk.10:14) Children belong to the Reign of God just because, like the poor, the hungry and the suffering, they are powerless and vulnerable. When Jesus says 'Whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it', he is likely to mean that 'childness' is a *human* quality that children exemplify and adults are likely to compromise or lose. These qualities are, at least, 'vulnerability, openness, immediacy, and neediness'. Matthew records how, when 'the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven?', Jesus called a child, set him in front of them, and said, 'Truly I tell you: unless you turn round and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven.' (Mt.18:1-3) Matthew's Jesus critiques the hierarchical and androcentric structures of households. The *human* quality of humility is specified and again, children have it and adults are in danger of losing it.

"Whoever receives a child like this in my name," he [Jesus] said, "receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the One who sent me."' (Mk.9:36-7) This saying challenges both what we take God to be and where God is manifested in the human world. There is an assumed solidarity of Jesus with children which is as

theologically robust as his more familiar solidarity with God the Father (and with which theology is more comfortable). Jesus teaches that for adults to inflict harm on children is a horrendous crime. (Mt.18:6-7) Matthew's Palm Sunday narrative includes the detail 'When the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things he did, and heard the boys in the temple shouting, 'Hosanna to the Son of David!' they were indignant and asked him, 'Do you hear what they are saying?' Jesus answered, 'I do. Have you never read the text, "You have made children and babes at the breast sound your praise aloud"?' (Mt. 21:14-16) Children are shown to have an innate understanding of who Jesus is. Even babies understand what the learned and wise do not. (Mt.11:25)

1.2. The Bible and Children. There can be little doubt that Jesus had a particular and intense love for children. How the atmosphere changes when we move into the rest of the New Testament! The author of Ephesians contrasts 'the full stature of Christ' with the gullible state of childhood which Christians are to eschew. (Eph.4:14) The author of 1 Timothy thinks that having children is how women overcome the gendered consequences of the fall of Eve. (1 Tim.2:15) Hugh Pyper says that in the New Testament 'childbearing is if anything discouraged', citing this verse as 'the one justification for it'. Paul's inspirational poem about the greatest of the Spirit's fruits, love, is less positive about the provisional and immature state of childhood: 'When I was a child I spoke like a child, thought like a child, reasoned like a child; but when I grew up I finished with childish things.' (1 Cor.13:11) In the same letter he complains that when he came to Corinth 'I had to deal with you on the natural plane, as infants in Christ. I fed you on milk, instead of solid food, for which you were not yet ready. Indeed, you are still not ready for it…' (1 Cor.3:1b-3a)

 The discouragement of marriage in the NT and the warning against its attendant cares (including children?!) strikes a dissonant chord. St. Paul's preference for celibacy has been very influential, (1 Cor.7:25-38) and for the first 1,500 years of Christendom so has the warning of Jesus that 'those who have been judged worthy of a place in the other world, and of the resurrection from the dead, do not marry…' (Lk.20:35) If celibacy is better than marriage then it is better not to have children than to have them. The Household Codes affirm a hierarchical order in the household, as in the Empire, and children are required to display unquestioning obedience to their parents (Eph.6:1; Col.3:20). Obedience is the pre-condition of the discredited patriarchal order, and contemporary theology has to disentangle itself from it completely. In the Petrine Holiness Code (1 Pet.2:13-3.7) children make no appearance at all.

There is evidence already in the New Testament of the 'adultisation' of the faith. This is a twofold process. On the one hand, the vocabulary of childhood, of the *mikroi* or 'little ones', (Mt.18:6,10,14) and of the *teknia* or 'little children' (e.g. 1 Jn.2:1), is metaphorically extended (usurped?) to bring to speech the *adult* relation to the divine Father. On the other hand, the vocabulary of parenthood is metaphorically extended (usurped?) to bring to speech the *divine* relation to human adults. The unfortunate result is that the anchoring of child-language in the situation of actual children and families is easily displaced. The Gospel of John is more interested in the second birth, the birth 'from above' (*anòthen*), (Jn.3:3) than in the birth of actual children. And so the

displacement continues. We are to call no-one on earth our father (unless he is our priest), for there is one Father in heaven. (Mt.23:9) The church is our Mother, and we are made 'children of God' through our baptism. OK, but has anyone noticed what is going on? There is a real danger that the appropriation of familial language in order to conceptualize the *adult* relation to God marginalizes earthly fathers, mothers and children. This has been done by a patriarchal church run by men who have been removed from the joys and responsibilities of earthly parenting, and who in the main relegate women, children, and parenting to an inferior status. The whole-scale adoption of familial language by the Church for theological purposes requires devices such as that of 'the domestic church' to re-sacralise real families, and restore to them their due spiritual dignity.

The Hebrew scriptures are no better. Undergirding all three Western faiths is the frankly repulsive story of the *Akedah,* of Abraham's willing sacrifice of Isaac. Whatever spiritual meaning patriarchal theology can still find in this shocking narrative, a Patriarch is willing to kill his child for the sake of a God who apparently demands, for his own glory, acts of child murder. (Gen.22:1-18) This story impregnates Judaism and Islam. Carol Delaney's brilliant analysis of it, and the influence of it, extends to the cultural willingness to sacrifice many millions of young men (and now won) for the sake of the fatherland in avoidable wars. God demands human sacrifice. Millions more Christians have been taught to think that the *Akedah* prefigures another child murder, one that really happened, when God the Father did not substitute a ram, but required the actual sacrifice of His Son – *divine* child murder, all for the sake of our sins! This is truly gruesome stuff which our contemporaries will not receive as gospel. The Hebrew scriptures authorise the corporal punishment of children (see Pr.13:24, 22:15, 23:13-14, 29:15, Sir.30:1-13), and the incalculable encouragement these give to abusive fathers down to the present day has been documented by a victim of such abuse, Janet Pais.

    1.3. The Tradition and Children. The tradition is as ambivalent as scripture. Christians disapproved of abortion and the abandonment of children from the earliest times. Clement of Alexandria is probably nearer to the spirit of Jesus than most, but any influence he had was eclipsed by Augustine who attributes the doom of original sin even to the child in the womb. Only Christ himself, being conceived without sexual intercourse, escaped the doom of original sin, and can save us from it. Baptism, of course, is needed for the cleansing from sin. Without it eternal damnation follows the premature death of a child. This, decided Augustine, was the fate of the Holy Innocents (Mt.2:16-18). Aquinas' invention of the *limbus puerorum*, of limbo, was an attempt to recognise the innocence of the unborn. Dead unbaptized children 'are denied intimate union with God but spared the physical, spiritual, and psychological pain of hell.' One can only imagine the distress this doctrine caused to grieving parents, unaware that Aquinas was a theological liberal on the matter, trying to modify the tradition he had received because he believed it was wrong. Our vocation is to be faithful to Christ, and not to behave towards children like his disciples.

    1.4 Jesus or the Bible? At the root of Christian ambivalence about children is what we take

scripture to be. Christians are redeemed not by the written word, but by the Word made flesh.

Protestant Christians have not always prioritised the teaching of Jesus (whether about children or anything else) but given it an equivalent status alongside the Household Codes and the authorization of physical abuse of children in a uniformly read inspired Bible. But the Bible in the hands of Christians testifies to the divine Word among us. When it becomes an independent source of revelation, idolatry is the next step, and the exclusion of minorities is the result. The Anglican House of Bishops document *Some Issues in Human Sexuality* puts the problem well, and then exacerbates it. The Bishops set out two incompatible views of the Bible, both of which they advocate. Anglicans, the bishops explain, see the Bible 'as providing normative guidance for their sexual conduct'. And they see it this way because of the status they give 'to the Bible as a whole as pointing to Christ, through whom God has revealed to his people what he is like, what he has done for them, and how they should respond to him'. Later in the chapter these views are formally separated. The first regards the Bible 'as a witness to the grace of God': the second regards it as 'a guide to Christian discipleship'. But a primary source of confusion in the *Guide* and in the churches is the conflation of these two views. Since the Bible points to Christ, it is clearly right to speak of it as a 'witness' to him. Because Jesus is God, Jesus is God's revelation, and the Bible, like John the Baptist, is a witness to that. But when the Bible is thought to provide 'normative guidance' for the conduct of Christians, it may then cease to be the witness to God's revelation, and *become* the revelation instead. But this is a confusion as serious as confusing the witness to a crime with the criminal who commits the criminal act!

As we all know the current polemics in the churches about sexuality are about whether the Bible is a 'guidebook' or not. One side looks up homosexuality in the inspired guidebook, claims to find it, and breathtakingly condemns it with apparent divine authority. In my current project, *The Savage Text,* I show there is nothing new about this. The guidebook view has divinely authorised the silencing of women, the burning of witches, the torture of heretics, the abuse of children, the owning of slaves, the slaughter of infidels and Jews, and, even as we gather here today, the further marginalizing and scapegoating of lesbian, gay and bisexual people and their partnerships is being planned. There are to be yet more victims of the guidebook view and they matter less than maintaining the apparent unity of the Anglican Communion. It is time to repudiate the guidebook view of the Bible and treat it instead as a witness to the Word made flesh, not as an equivalent or even a substitute.

2. Changing Families

2.1. Socio-sexual Changes. One of the Church's tasks, then, is to identify with children as Jesus did, and that will mean putting to one side much of the theology we have inherited. We can't perform the task unless we understand something of the socio-sexual changes that have occurred in the last 40 years in all First World societies. These

changes include the availability of reliable contraception, access to abortion, earlier sexual experience, the loss of stigma attaching to single-parent families, a large increase in unmarried cohabiting couples, the separation of sex from marriage, the separation of marriage from parenthood, the rise in divorces and remarriages, the catastrophic impact of divorce on children, the fall in the birth rate, the increase in intentionally childless fertile couples, the later age of first marriage, the de-criminalization of male homosexual experience, and the higher profile of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people.

Faced with an agenda of complexity and uncertainty, the conservative temperament reaches for simplicity and security, treats the Bible as the Good Sex Guide (but only if you're straight and married), and defines 'churchmanship' (please excuse the sexism of that term) in relation to homosexuality. This strategy brilliantly deflects the moral searchlight from probing the deep mess heterosexual relations are in – the reasons why marriages fail, the alarming and growing incidence of partner and child abuse, the ubiquity of adultery and use of pornography, and the failure of mainstream theology to comprehend any of it.

2.2. Secular family theory. There is a polarity in secular thought between the 'demoralisation thesis' (advocated by the 'pessimists') and the 'democratization thesis' (advocated by the 'optimists'). According to the pessimists the crisis over families is a moral crisis, fed by selfish individualism and the lack of commitment of partners to one another, which have 'de-moralised' an entire generation. Pessimists *interpret* family breakdown as a major *causal* , but preventable, contribution to human misery, and in particular to the diminution of the happiness and life-chances of children. There are said to be several versions of the thesis: *conservative*, where traditional values have been corrupted by liberalism and permissive hedonism; *socialist*, where market values have corrupted the human spirit; and *communitarian*, where 'the movement of both parents into work, the values of careerism and consumption have weakened commitment to care for children'.

The alternative thesis welcomes 'the move away from traditional gender divisions, assumptions of lifelong marriage, duty and dependence as heralding relationships that are more equal and mutually satisfying, because they are no longer held in place by obligation and convention, but are negotiated'. On this view, democratic choice replaces outmoded social expectations and prejudices. Optimists think the consequences of family breakdown are over-dramatized. Most, but not all, religious thought has sided with, and contributed to, the former thesis.

2.3. Empirical evidence and the thriving of children. Serious practical theology has to engage with the empirical world. That means participating in the arguments of empirical disciplines, respecting data, and following arguments where you don't want them to go! There are pessimists and optimists about the thriving of children in non-traditional families, but I don't think that justifies an easy neutrality about them. For the sake of brevity I will refer to a reliable summary of the available evidence, published in 2002 by thirteen renowned family scholars in the USA, *Why Marriage Matters: Twenty-One Conclusions from the Social Sciences*. The report deals with four areas. With regard, first,

to family relationships it concludes that 'Marriage increases the likelihood that fathers have good relationships with their children'; that 'Cohabitation is not the functional equivalent of marriage'; and that 'Growing up outside an intact marriage increases the likelihood that children will themselves divorce or become unwed-parents'. Divorce is twice as likely among children whose parents have divorced.' Second, the team concludes that 'Divorce and unmarried childbearing increase poverty for both children and mothers'. They warn that 'Parental divorce (or failure to marry) appears to increase children's risk of school failure', and has 'a significant, long-term negative impact' on children's 'educational' and 'socioeconomic attainment'.

Third, with regard to physical health, the team concludes that 'Children who live with their own two married parents enjoy better physical health, on average, than do children in other family forms': and that 'Parental marriage is associated with a sharply lower risk of infant mortality', around 50% in the case of children of unmarried mothers. Marriage is associated with 'reduced rates of alcohol and substance abuse for both adults and teens', and with 'better health and lower rates of injury, illness, and disability for both men and women'. Married people live longer than single people. Fourth, there are, according to the team, similar benefits with regard to the mental health and emotional well being of members of intact families. Children of divorce have higher rates of psychological distress and mental illness, and suicide. 'Boys raised in single-parent homes are about twice as likely (and boys raised in stepfamilies are three times as likely) to have committed a crime that leads to incarceration by the time they reach their early thirties'. 'Married women appear to have a lower risk of experiencing domestic violence than do cohabiting or dating women'. 'A child who is not living with his or her own two married parents is at greater risk of child abuse'.

Despite much sand in the engine of political correctness, I am unaware of any successful attempt to refute their conclusions. There are appropriate caveats about the data. They are not predictions. They do not establish causal relations between non-intact or blended families and the failure of children to thrive. They do not make moral judgments. The conclusions are provisional. Since societies don't stop changing, future conclusions will be different. They are statistical probabilities and controls for class, poverty and ethnic origin are built into the results. There will continue to be bad intact families and good alternative ones. The statistics are seized on by the moral majority (even though their record on family breakdown is no better) as evidence for the need to return to 'family values' (by which they mean the patriarchal nuclear family and the condemnation of homosexuality which is metamorphosed into a 'threat').

But the misuse of evidence does not mean that evidence should not be taken seriously. Advocates of marriage (like myself) strongly dislike patriarchy and appeals to so-called 'traditional family values', but instead of moving away from marriage it is timely to advocate an egalitarian, non-patriarchal version of that institution instead. There is what John Witte, Jr., calls 'the health paradigm of marriage'. This, he says, is 'both very new and very old'; new because it is validated by empirical secular research, old because 'the West has had a long and thick overlapping consensus that marriage is good, does good, and has goods both for the couple and for the children'. There are theological

re-readings which require that marriage be companionate rather than hierarchical, and there is a simple but neglected argument for marriage based on the teaching of Jesus about children. It cannot be claimed that the teaching of Jesus honours nuclear families. Jesus was persistently suspicious of any family structure not rooted in the values of God's Reign. But the teaching of Jesus puts children first, and reverses all power structures around children which compromise the priority that is to be afforded to them. The argument is:

Premise 1:   Jesus Christ wills the flourishing of all children.
Premise 2:   Children are more likely to flourish within marriage.
Therefore: Jesus Christ wills marriage for bringing up children.

I think this argument is sound. There will always be exceptions. The conclusion does not pretend to be a direct intuition of the mind of Christ. It does however follow inductively from the premises. Premise 1 is derived from the teaching of Jesus about children. Premise 2, long believed by the Church, is now given further (and massive) empirical support. The conclusion is highly congruent with the better known teaching of Jesus about marriage and divorce, and supports the traditional interpretation of it. The remaining issue is how to commend marriage while at the same time not stigmatizing alternatives.

3. Theology, Sexuality and Children

Children are the displaced ones in the present ecclesial incivilities. Feminist theology, lesbian and gay theology, queer theology, and so on, all have their different and legitimate agendas, but children are generally nowhere to be found within them. Mainstream theology has little to say about childhood, and conservative theology emphasises marriage, not because of its intrinsic theological and human worth (I suspect), but because God ordained it, and it remains a useful means of informal policing of sexual practice. Just as Jesus put a child in the midst of them when he was asked a theological question, (Mt.18:2) I want to put children in the middle of any Christian sexual ethic or theology. Here are just two features of a child-centred sexual ethic:

3.1. Children are part of the purpose of marriage. All of us probably welcome the recent personalism of marital theology whereby the meaning or sacramentality of marriage is located in the quality of the relationship between the partners. For 40 years that is also the position of official Roman Catholic theology: that there are two purposes to marriage, *procreative* and *unitive*, and each is equally important. Personalism also provides sound common ground for sexual intimacy between same-sex and opposite-sex partners. The crucial difference between these relationships is that straight sexual intimacy is likely to produce children: contraceptive practice reduces but does not eliminate this possibility. We may not want to use Pope John Paul II's term 'nuptial meaning of the body', but we should not eliminate fertility from the meanings of our embodied life, even if for same-sex couples and partner-less peoplethe ability to create life is not expressed biologically, but in other creative ways. Children deserve to be wanted, and they need loving parents who can be good models of motherhood and

fatherhood.

3.2. Churches should be advocates for children. Some theologians, notably Pope John Paul II in *Evangelium vitae*, have produced a series of 'moral deficit' arguments leading to the conclusion that children are the victims of a culture that is at turns hedonistic, narcissistic, indulgent, selfish, and competitive. The best known of these posits a 'contraceptive mentality' which is thought to lead from the planning of births to the refusal of the gift of children. But Protestant theologians have drawn attention to other harmful 'mentalities'. The consumer mentality has been powerfully criticised by Bonnie Miller-McLemore. She finds that the 'powerful controlling logic of market utility' has 'invaded domestic and social life'. She thinks 'people rather unwittingly transfer understandings from the world of production – to compete, win, and be first – to the world of child rearing'. She blames the 'instrumental, consumerist thinking of market capitalism' for three distorted images of children: as *products, consumers*, and *burdens*. Reproductive technology, in particular, encourages 'the view of child bearing as analogous to making any other purchase in which one selects the most desirable features'. Herbert Anderson and Susan Johnson understand modern societies to produce a culture of *indifference* to children. There posit three types of indifference manifesting themselves in three linked attitudes to children. Children are regarded as *'private property'*. This attitude confuses children with things; it lies behind the justification and practice of the corporal punishment of children, and regards the family as a private domain, free from public scrutiny or reproof. The second attitude regards children as *'depraved'*', that is, as inheritors of original sin, requiring correction and conversion. The third attitude regards them as *'incomplete'*. This attitude 'gives the appearance of valuing children by creating environments to protect and train them.' In fact, however, it overlooks the present needs of children by focusing on preparing them for their future in society.'

These social criticisms should be taken very seriously. If they are fair criticisms of late-capitalist, late-modern culture, the churches might counter them with child-friendly policies, practices and liturgies, and providing a serious theology of parenthood and family life (such as the Roman Catholic 'domestic church' tries to do. Coupled with the postmodern work-ethic, the difficulty of combining careers with domestic work and child care, the cost of raising children, and so on, many couples, including Christians, are choosing to have fewer or no children. That is a huge change for the church, unprecedented yet taking place without acknowledgement or even a theological whimper. A huge reflexive question looms: do we unwittingly assimilate these anti-child mentalities? Are we 'colonised' in our thinking by anti-child attitudes?

4. Conclusion: Justice for Children

Justice for children? I have tried at least to *include* children in any Christian sexual ethic. Other ways remain open, e.g., the ascription to them of rights, as the authors of *Honouring Children* have done. It remains problematic to subsume Christian sexual ethics under the rubric of 'justice', not only because it is not clear which concept of justice in being invoked, but because there are usually richer theological resources available. In the case of children, what could be more persuasive than the teaching of

Jesus himself?

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See Judith M. Gundry-Wolf, 'The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament', in Marcia J. Bunge (ed.), *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids, Michigan /Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 2001), [29-60] p.38. I am much indebted to Gundry-Wolf for her fresh presentation of Jesus' teaching about children

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Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, p.90.

Herbert Anderson & Susan B.W. Johnson, *Regarding Children: A New Respect for Childhood and Families* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), pp.13-16.

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