

# Heterosexism

By Katie Sherrod

WHEN I READ the “pastoral” letter that came out of the May 2003 meeting of the Primates of the Anglican Communion in Brazil, I was reminded of men with whom I worked in the early 1970s.

I was one of a handful of female reporters in a Texas newsroom. We were viewed with suspicion if not outright hostility. However, our biggest problem was not the Bubbas who called us all “little lady” and sometimes literally patted us on our heads.

Our biggest problem was the few white male reporters and editors who prided themselves on their liberalism. These “friends” would jump to answer editors’ questions addressed to one of us; they would come out of a professional meeting to which no women had been invited and brag about speaking up for us when the bosses talked about “the girls”; they would cover a public event in a male-only club and tell us how angry they were that the club had demanded a male reporter; they would boast of how they “let” their wives work.

When we tried to explain that their behavior was sexist, every one of them was astonished, hurt and defensive. After all, they were liberals, men who even fancied themselves feminists.

It never seemed to occur to them that we were capable of defending ourselves and our work to editors; that we should be included in any meeting in which we were being discussed; that they should refuse to participate in any organization’s attempt to dictate which reporter would be assigned to cover a public event; that their wives didn’t need their permission to work. With few exceptions, these well-meaning men never understood they were complicit in perpetuating a sexist system.

In the same way, the Primates of the Anglican Communion are complicit in perpetuating a heterosexist system. It is especially troubling to

see the Archbishop of Canterbury and our own Presiding Bishop apparently so oblivious to this reality.

“Heterosexism” describes an ideological system that names heterosexuality as the social norm and enforces that norm through practices and attitudes of institutions and individuals. A website edited by James T. Sears and Walter L. Williams and supported by the ONE Institute ([www.oneinstitute.org](http://www.oneinstitute.org)), founded by gay men and lesbians in Los Angeles in 1952, defines

heterosexism as “a belief in the superiority of heterosexuals or heterosexuality evidenced in the exclusion, by omission or design, of non-heterosexual persons in policies, procedures, events or activities.”

Heterosexism is like the air we breathe.

It is usually invisible to us because we are immersed in it. Within the reality created by a heterosexist worldview, heterosexuality is the only “normal” and “healthy” sexuality. It is the design for all human interaction. All else is consigned to invisibility or to the sphere of the deviant.

It is heterosexism when a straight white liberal male bishop decides to educate the church by introducing a resolution to the 2000 General Convention on the “sin of heterosexism” without consulting with the leadership of high-profile organizations of lesbians and gays in the church and without giving any thought to how his resolution might set off discussions that could help derail legislation toward which these organizations had spent years working.

It is heterosexism when a straight white male bishop in a progressive diocese announces to the leadership of Claiming the Blessing that he plans to introduce his own resolution aimed at getting General Convention’s authorization for the development of liturgies for same-sex blessings. This, in spite of them telling him quite plainly that his resolution may not help but hinder, and asking him not to do this. His stub-

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bornness is the equivalent of those Bubbas patting us female reporters on our heads and telling us not to worry, they'd take care of us.

It is heterosexism when a House of Bishops Theology Committee issues a report announcing that they decided — without any gays or lesbians in the room — to use “homosexual persons” instead of “gay and lesbian” in their report. As one wag said, “What’s next, a report on Negroes?” It is heterosexism of the most offensive kind when they purport to issue a report on the theology of same-sex blessings without talking with any lesbians or gay men.

Another way to “get” heterosexism is to take a look at a “heterophobic” or “homosexist” worldview. The following questions are from the Lesbian Lives website. The complete questionnaire is available at [www.angelfire.com/oh/leanow/questionnaire.html](http://www.angelfire.com/oh/leanow/questionnaire.html).

**Pause a moment to reflect on these questions.**

- *What do you think caused your heterosexuality?*
  - *When and how did you first decide you were a heterosexual?*
  - *It is possible that your heterosexuality is just a phase you'll grow out of?*
  - *Do you think you may have turned to heterosexuality out of fear of rejection?*
  - *If you've never slept with a person of the same sex, how do you know you wouldn't prefer that?*
  - *Your heterosexuality doesn't offend me as long as you leave me alone, but why do so many heterosexuals try to seduce others into that orientation?*
  - *Why must heterosexuals be so blatant, making a public spectacle of their heterosexuality? Can't you just be what you are and keep it quiet?*
  - *Why are heterosexuals so promiscuous, always having affairs?*
- Having the tables turned is not a nice experience, is it?

But lesbians of the Episcopal Church are not interested in turning the tables on heterosexuals. They simply want to claim the blessing already promised them in their baptism. They want to participate fully both in the life of the church and in their committed relationships.

They want to be talked with, argued with, engaged in decisions that affect them — not talked about, as the Primates did in their meeting in Brazil in May 2003, or treated as a problem or theoretical issue somehow apart from the work of the church.

In short, they want what all humans want — to be treated not only as the children of God that they are, but also as *adults* of God. ●

## about the author

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