

Multiculturally challenged

From the Editors in the [September 23, 1998](#) issue

There's much talk in the churches these days about "multicultural" sensitivity, and Western Christians often worry about participating in Western "cultural imperialism." But such rhetoric can appear empty when a debate turns to specific issues that are close to someone's heart--as happened at the August meeting of the Lambeth Conference, the once-a-decade gathering of bishops in the Anglican Communion.

This year the bishops from Africa and Asia outnumbered those from Europe and North America, and one result of this reconfiguration was the passage of a resolution strongly condemning homosexual practice and the blessing of same-sex unions. Taking the most forceful stance against homosexuality were bishops from places like Nigeria, Uganda and Pakistan; those taking a more moderate or accepting stance came mostly from the U.S., Canada and Europe.

For many African and Asian bishops, especially those who live in societies with a strong Muslim presence, the church's association with what is regarded as the decadent West is already a serious public relations problem. Anything less than a strong condemnation of homosexuality by Lambeth would have been, as one bishop put it, "evangelical suicide."

The debate offered some painful ironies. The bishops from the West who pushed for greater church acceptance of homosexuals were probably the bishops who, on other issues, would be anxious not to enforce a Western perspective. At Lambeth the liberal bishops were upbraided by their Third World colleagues for "imperialism" and for "abusing" other Christians with a "Western problem."

Adding to the cross-cultural fireworks was Bishop John Spong of Newark, New Jersey, who declared that the Third World bishops had a "superstitious" approach to Christianity (he later apologized for using the term). Describing the clash over homosexuality, Spong observed that "scientific advances" have given the West an understanding of homosexuals that has not yet "percolated down" into the Third World. For Bishop Spong, apparently, it is still the role of the West to enlighten our Third World brothers and sisters, at least on the subject of sex.

Multicultural sensitivity does not require Spong and others to abandon their views on homosexuality. Simply because an opinion is opposed in the Third World or reflects the experience of Western culture does not mean it is wrong. Spong and others may in fact be right that the West's general openness on matters of sexuality has allowed the church in the West to have particular insights into the meaning of homosexuality.

But multicultural sensitivity surely does require that one think carefully about how one's insights can be most fruitfully shared with the rest of the church and shared in a way that respects not only the perspective of other Christians but the sometimes perilous cultural context in which other Christians make their witness. Besides, Western Christians who think they have things to learn from Third World Christians about community, tradition and family should not decide beforehand that they have nothing to learn from them about sexuality.

Since Christ is able to speak to and through all cultures, we should expect a dizzying variety of Christian witnesses and a host of ways in which the gospel will interact with the particular cultures in which it takes root. One of the benefits of meetings like Lambeth is that it can remind Christians of this variety and of a gospel that challenges, fulfills and transcends all cultures, including one's own--and including its strengths.

It's disappointing when such understanding is curtailed by cross-cultural name-calling, and especially disappointing when some of the name-calling comes from the West, where Christians should have, and often claim to have, a sophisticated understanding of the interaction of culture and religion.