

Diocese's cold war against homosexuals

By GRAHAM WILLIAMS

Sydney Anglican diocese is at the forefront of the campaign to stop women priests, but for more than six years it has waged a much quieter war against practising homosexuals.

Since 1985, several homosexuals have been, in effect, excommunicated — denied communion and cut off from any role in the Church, even singing in the choir.

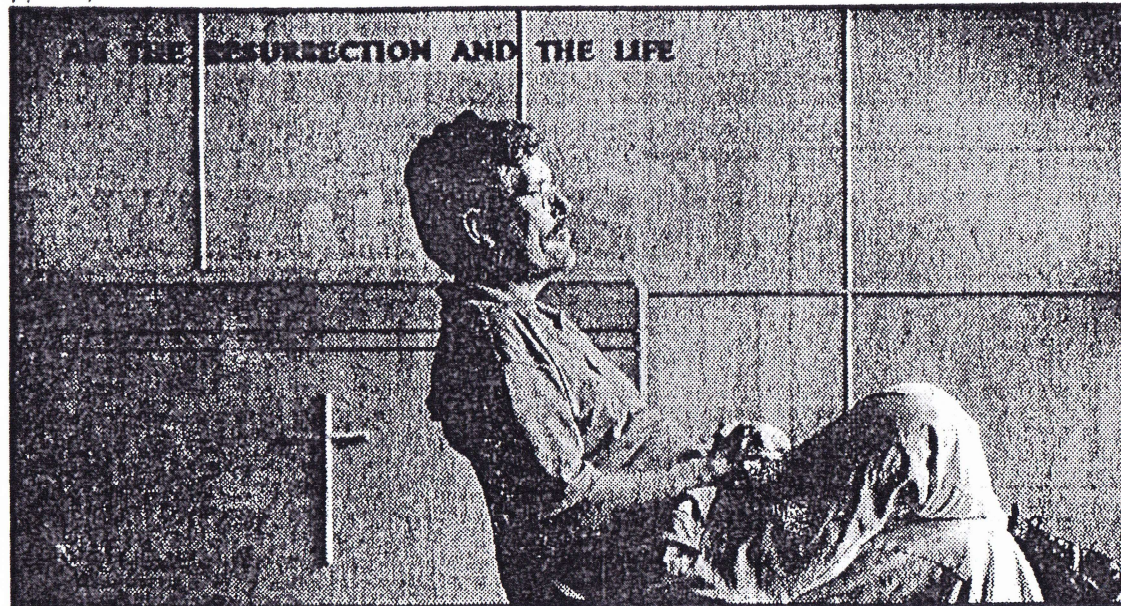
It is impossible to get numbers, as the exercise is done secretly. But the *Herald* has interviewed two excommunicated people who have broken years of silence on what they describe as "a most devastating" and "brutal" experience.

A senior Sydney cleric, the Rev Robert Forsyth, who has been outspoken against women priests, said yesterday: "The women priests issue will be solved much more quickly than the far more serious issue of homosexuals."

Mr Forsyth, rector of St Barnabas, Broadway, and Anglican chaplain to Sydney University, said there were similarities with the women priests issue — in both cases it was about whether gender mattered.

He admitted he had had to "talk" to some women parishioners about their homosexuality in 1984 — but he denied that he had excommunicated anyone.

"I felt rotten talking to people and saying 'You must stop this', [having sex]," he said. "My attitude is people should not sleep around out of marriage, whether they are heterosexual or homosexual."



The Rev Robert Forsyth ... "My attitude is people should not sleep around out of marriage, whether they are heterosexual or homosexual."

Picture by GREG WHITE

He said that as he believed sex should only be in the context of marriage, and as homosexuals could not marry, Christian homosexuals should be celibate.

The issue has reached a sensitive stage, with Sydney's attitude on homosexuals at odds with the more accepting attitude of the rest of the Anglican Church worldwide and most other Churches.

The House of Bishops of the Church in England issued a statement last December saying that the

church should welcome homosexuals who were convinced that "a faithfully sexual active relationship with one other person ... is the way of life God wills for them".

A 1985 report on homosexuality by the Sydney synod's standing committee, endorsed by the synod, says active homosexuals, if they persist after counselling, are to be excluded from communion and from any role in the Church.

It says the appropriate test to apply is the *Book of Common Prayer's* test of "open and notorious

evil liver" — whom the minister must take steps to exclude from the Lord's Table "lest the congregation be thereby offended".

The report adds: "A practising homosexual, as defined, cannot properly occupy any office of perform any duty which involves ministry." This bars them from taking part in communion, confirmation and baptism, from being an organist, choir-member, Sunday school teacher or lesson reader.

Some clergy in Sydney privately described the report as "medieval

and said they did not enforce it.

The let-out for clergy is, as the report makes clear, they are not to inquire into a person's sexual habits unless the minister has some ground for concern. So the issue usually arises when they confide to a minister that they are homosexual.

Father Austin Day, rector of Christ Church St Laurence, in the City, which has some gay parishioners, said: "We are not here to deny anyone the sacraments. I make my decisions about what I do."

A former convener of the now-defunct Anggays — a support group for homosexual Anglicans — Ms Prue Borthwick, said: "We folded up after 10 years because we didn't have the strength to keep fighting."

"This policy of excommunication has caused a tremendous amount of hurt to committed Christians and it is like the way they treat women over the women priests issue."

A Sydney Anglican Church spokesman, Archdeacon Geoff Huard, said he agreed with the thrust of the report but said "different ministers will deal with it in different ways".

He said it was a matter for counselling if a person told a minister he or she was homosexual, but the minister would not go prying into a person's sexuality.

The Catholic Church similarly does not pry into a person's sexuality. A diocesan spokesman, Father Brian Lucas, said: "The presumption is that people who present themselves at the Eucharist are entitled to do so."