

GRACE

and Disagreement

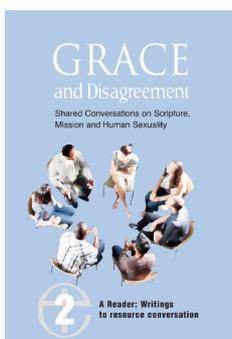
Shared Conversations on Scripture,
Mission and Human Sexuality



Thinking through the process

This short handbook, and its accompanying Reader, have been designed to help take forward the process of shared conversations on scripture, mission and human sexuality within the Church of England.

Also available:



Copies of both resources are available to download via
www.churchofengland.org/sharedconversations

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Shared Conversations on
Scripture, Mission and
Human Sexuality

1

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We are the body of Christ. In the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body. Let us then pursue all that makes for peace and builds up our common life.

Common Worship

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

1 Corinthians 1: 27–29 [NRSV]

*O God, forasmuch as without you
we are not able to please you;
mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit
may in all things direct and rule our hearts;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.*

Common Worship:

Collect for the Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity

The Pilling Report

In November 2013, the House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality published its report. The group was chaired by Sir Joseph Pilling and the report quickly became known as "The Pilling Report" which, for brevity, is how it will be referred to here.

The Working Group was convened by the House of Bishops to reflect upon "*biblical, historical and ecumenical explorations on human sexuality and materials from the listening process undertaken in the light of the 1998 Lambeth Conference*", and to "*offer proposals on how the continuing discussion within the Church of England about these matters might best be shaped in the light of the listening process*".

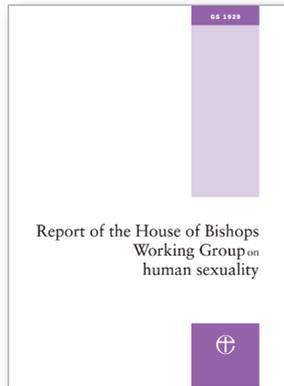
In one of its key recommendations, the Report concluded that:

 *The subject of sexuality, with its history of deeply entrenched views, would best be addressed by facilitated conversations or a similar process to which the Church of England needs to commit itself at national and diocesan level. This should continue to involve profound reflection on the interpretation and application of Scripture.*

Consultation on this report should be conducted without undue haste but with a sense of urgency, perhaps over a period of two years.



This short handbook, and its accompanying Reader, have been designed to help take forward that commitment to shared conversations. They do not set out to duplicate or revisit in detail the material in the Pilling Report, and some familiarity with the Report would be helpful for anyone taking part in the conversations.



The Pilling Report was published in November 2013. The text is available online at www.churchofengland.org/pilling and in book and ebook formats from Church House Publishing at www.chpublishing.co.uk

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Shared and Facilitated Conversations: Building Trust

Conversations are about open exchange. Where there is suspicion and mistrust, where depths of disagreement suggest an unbridgeable divide, the barriers to conversation are considerable. Yet without some kind of meeting through conversation, the divide risks becoming a chasm.

Goodwill alone cannot always bring about good conversation. The point of facilitation is precisely "what it says on the tin" – to assist in creating a safe space where questions of difference and disagreement can be explored; to provide a non-partisan, non-judgemental presence in every conversation group to hold boundaries and help the process move deeper than platitudes.

More about the facilitators and their role is discussed in the section on process later in this handbook.

Neither the process of conversation nor the facilitators have any authority in terms of the church's decision-making. Responsibility for decisions on policy and practice lies with the bishops and the Synod. Each of the conversation groups will report on its exchanges and the experience of conversing together. These reports will be drawn together and the bishops and Synod will have access to the combined reports. Whatever emerges from the groups will inform subsequent discussions in the House and College of Bishops and in the Synod.

At the beginning of the process, the content of any report is unknowable. But the shared conversations are taking place in the hope that their primary outcome will be a new sense that all participants have had a chance to speak and a chance to be heard accurately. More than that, the process is based on the hope that participants will have been able to explore the extent to which they can discern something of Christ in those with whom they disagree, and gain a clearer sense of the scope and limits to working together and exploring the extent and limits of differences.

3

Mission in a Changing Social Context

The Pilling Report drew attention to the speed of change in social attitudes to human sexuality – especially to homosexuality (paragraphs 149–173). It also noted the association between people's age and their attitudes, with high levels of acceptance of homosexuality predominating among younger people. The report's Recommendation 8 noted that "*... there is a great deal of evidence that, the younger people are, the more accepting of same sex attraction they are likely to be. That should not of itself determine the Church's teaching.*"

Since the report was published, same sex marriage has been legalised in Britain. Whilst the Church of England is not required to solemnise same sex marriages, and continues to regard marriage as between one man and one woman, the advent of same sex marriage, widely supported across the political spectrum, creates an acute divergence between the church's teaching on marriage and the civil law of the land. It is likely that the ease with which same sex marriage was accepted in Parliament reflects a more general social move away from the church's traditional understanding of marriage – and perhaps of social relationships more generally. And, as often happens, legislation both reflects social attitudes and contributes to the deeper embedding of those attitudes over time.

As the theologian Professor Oliver O'Donovan commented to the Pilling group, there is something genuinely new about the ways in which homosexuality is being constructed and interpreted in contemporary society. He noted that this raises new and complex questions about the church's understanding and response, and that "*it will require*

a great deal of straightforward observation, perhaps over several generations, before we can begin to answer any of these questions with confidence" (paragraph 271).

And, of course, it is not only in relation to same sex relationships that social attitudes are changing rapidly. In patterns of sexual behaviour, understandings of relationships, marriage and the family, the last half-century has seen the fragmentation of what once seemed to be enduring social norms. Historians have shown that what once looked like eternal moral and social truths were often, in reality, relatively recent developments. But the rapidity of social change and the awareness of diverse traditions, views and practices within the population at large, have certainly created a new context for the mission of today's church, and one where a broadly Christian world view cannot be assumed to be shared moral ground across society.

As the report and its recommendations make clear, the fact of rapid social change does not entail that the church must change its teaching. Social change does, however, change the relationship of the church and its teaching to the surrounding culture. The church's missionary task has to be framed afresh for a new context.

So, a primary question on which the church must reflect is:

What is the church's missionary task today in relation to LGBTI people, and to the culture within which we are called to witness and minister?

There are plenty of precedents for the church standing out against cultural trends which seem remote from the gospel – and there are many instances where the church has found that new cultural patterns can reflect God's will and God's love. The theologian, H. Richard Niebuhr, famously set out five contrasting models of how the church can relate Christ to culture, all drawing on clear and authentic Christian roots.* Living faithfully within the surrounding culture has always

* Christ Against Culture; Christ of Culture; Christ Above Culture; Christ and Culture in Paradox; Christ Transforming Culture.

raised important theological questions for Christians. Finding a way forward is a matter of discernment and, regarding our culture's approaches to sexuality, the church, at present, is divided. The way forward is unclear. But the church is called to mission in all cultures and at all times. The emerging culture around issues of human sexuality – which in Britain and other parts of the Western world now includes the reality of same sex marriages – is already our mission context. That is why the Pilling Report recognised that a process of shared conversations should "*be conducted without undue haste but with a sense of urgency, perhaps over a period of two years*" (Recommendation 3).

Whether the church will ever be of one mind about a missionary response to the changing culture around sexuality is an open question. The history of the church suggests that there are usually tensions between those who seek to be immersed in, and seek God within, the world (stressing a theology of the incarnation) and others who stress the search for holiness in withdrawal from the world's mores and the embrace of a sharply counter-cultural message and lifestyle. Sometimes these different emphases have led to division and separation: sometimes they have coexisted as corrective influences on each other.

Nor is the division entirely binary. As the Church of England's submission to the government consultation on same sex marriage pointed out, same sex relationships can embrace some real virtues. That does not make them identical, morally or in other ways, to heterosexual marriage. Whilst the church has frequently drawn clear lines between what is pure and what is not, it also recognises that human virtues are exhibited within a deeply compromised and sinful world. How far, then, might we agree about the extent and the limits of goodness and virtue in contexts which remain some distance from embodying the whole of God's intention for humanity? Specifically, what can we affirm, and what must we oppose, in relation to same sex relationships? What place does affirmation have in drawing people to Christ – and what part does confrontation play in mission?

Part of the conversation within the church today must be to explore whether different missionary responses to contemporary culture must be contradictory or could be complementary.

4

Resources for Conversation

In this handbook, we attempt to set out the rationale behind the shared conversations and some possible ways of understanding the context in which they take place. It is accompanied by a Reader which brings together a number of essays, articles and papers which may help prepare participants to dig deeper into some of the key issues and which draw upon some of the fruits of reflection and negotiation that has taken place already within the churches.

The reader includes:

- an essay setting out the understanding of scripture as traditionally received by the church, by The Revd Dr Ian Paul;
- an essay by Professor Loveday Alexander exploring the scholarship behind other understandings of how scripture approaches issues of human sexuality;
- a reflection in the light of the "Continuing Indaba" process in the Anglican Communion on how disagreements within the church can recapture a focus on mission, by Canon Dr Phil Groves of the Anglican Communion Office;
- the historical and theological sections of a paper, accepted by the Church of Scotland General Assembly in May 2014, on the scope and limits for differing positions on sexuality within one church; and
- a short bibliography of useful books relevant to the subject.

There is, of course, a vast amount of further literature which could have been included. But the four papers have been chosen with care to help resource conversations across differing views. They do not cover every theme that might arise in those conversations but aim to explore three core issues: the meaning and use of scripture, a perspective from the global church, and theological understandings of difference amongst Christians within a church.

The essays in the reader are designed to help participants explore three key issues.

a. Scripture and sexuality

The Pilling group came to recognise, in the course of its work, that one reason why the issue of sexuality is so difficult for the church is because it highlights questions about the meaning and use of scripture which go to the heart of people's sense of discipleship and their understanding of how God speaks to his people. For many, the matter of sexuality may be the presenting question, but what is at stake is the church's understanding of the God of the Old and New Testaments – the God of the church and of Jesus himself. That is one reason why questions of sexuality deserve the most serious attention by Christians and why it is so important to understand what drives those who seek to follow Christ to understand God's word differently.

The Pilling Report considered the different approaches to scriptures in relation to issues of same sex relationships. The report recognised that the depth of difference, between academics and more widely, about the meaning and use of scripture on matters of sexuality could not be satisfactorily resolved within the compass of a report of that nature. Two Appendices to the Report, by the Bishop of Birkenhead and by The Revd David Runcorn, attempted to epitomise the "traditionalist" and "revisionist" approaches to scripture. In various public responses to the report, each Appendix has been welcomed by some, and criticised by others. But there has been little engagement with the arguments of

both the authors to evaluate the relative strengths of what they say. As the Report noted (paragraph 226), in all the academic material on the subject, there has been little which engages systematically with opposing viewpoints. Serious biblical scholars are not agreed about how scripture should inform the church's dilemmas on sexuality and they do not appear to be approaching an academic consensus.

The Report itself did not attempt to analyse or decide upon all the scriptural arguments. Exploring the role of scripture, in ways which might enable those of differing views to understand each other and the underlying issues better, was recognised to be a task for the whole church, and shared conversations were the mechanism which the report recommended for such a process.

The two Appendices to the Pilling Report stand as useful background contributions to the shared conversations. But, to avoid the implication that the Appendices convey all that could be said on the subject, we have included two further contributions in the Reader accompanying this handbook. These have been written by two Anglican biblical scholars whose credentials and commitment to the Church of England commend them as persons with academic authority and with a grasp of what is at stake for the church. They are not so much offering an overview of the arguments as presenting two perspectives drawn from their years of detailed study.

The purpose in reproducing these essays, and in commending again the two Appendices to the Pilling Report, is to encourage all who take part in the shared conversations to engage with biblical scholarship and consider the competing arguments amongst academics in the field.

Among the questions for all readers are:

Is there anything in this material about the Bible which causes you to think afresh – whether to deepen your commitment to a position or to challenge it?

Is there anything here which causes you to take more seriously the position of those with whom you disagree – not necessarily to change your mind but to recognise the quality of study and reflection on which other views are founded?

The emphasis on scripture is deliberate. By turning to biblical scholars for assistance, and recognising the tensions between them in their work, we are affirming the significance of scripture as a source of Christian ethical reflection. Contrary to the assertions of some of its critics, the Pilling Report did not claim that scripture was “unclear” on matters of human sexuality – rather, it noted that members of the church, reflecting the work of the church’s best scholars, were not in agreement about how to interpret and apply scripture in terms of this issue. That is a comment about human fallibility, not a criticism of scripture.

God has, from the beginning, encouraged his people, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret the Bible in and for every age. That is the task and responsibility of Christ’s church – and one which has fallen on our generation, in our cultural context, in a very particular and problematic way.

b. Divisions within the Anglican Communion

The paper by Canon Dr Phil Groves builds on the learning from the "Continuing Indaba" process which has been taking place since the 2008 Lambeth Conference. It also brings home the importance of the whole Anglican Communion in the context of discussions on human sexuality, reminds us of the importance of the church's mission in all the world and considers how "good disagreement" might develop from a clearer focus on mission.

Since the 2008 Lambeth Conference, the Anglican Communion Office has been coordinating a "Continuing Indaba" process, building on the structured conversations which took place at the conference and based on the principle that careful listening and speaking might enable people at odds to work collaboratively together to explore the things that divide them within an overall sense of a shared fellowship. Indeed, it was this "Indaba" process which inspired the Pilling group to see a structured process of shared conversations, assisted by good facilitation, as a way of addressing the differences which the group's process had exposed so clearly.

It may be that the "Continuing Indaba" process in the Anglican Communion has something to teach members of the Church of England as we embark on our own shared conversations. Groves draws from that process a clear sense that the imperative of mission can give a new shape to our understanding of the context for conversation. Some dioceses may seek to involve other parts of the Communion in their conversations, perhaps through the relationships built up through their Companion Links, and Groves suggests that this would add vital dimensions to the conversations.

The Archbishop of Canterbury has highlighted the inter-connectedness of the Communion and the potential impact of decisions made in one Province on the lives and wellbeing of people in another.

Whether it is on matters of human sexuality or other things, what we each decide has impact on others around the world. I am not arguing that we should resist making decisions until the entire Anglican Communion (let alone the universal Church) is in total and unanimous agreement. That would be a legalistic and regulatory response to a problem which is relational and missional.

Rather, I am eager to encourage each of us to take full account of the way in which decisions in one Province echo around the world. We do not have a volume button that can limit or determine how our voices are heard beyond our own country or region. The impact of their echoes is something to which we must listen in the process of our decision-making, if we are not to narrow our horizons and reject the breadth of our global family. That process requires extensive conversation and prolonged engagement – an honest reinforcement of the bonds of relationship – amidst the confusing and costly work of common discernment.

Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury. From: Phil Groves and Angharad Parry Jones, *Living Reconciliation*, published by SPCK, November 2014.

As the Archbishop made clear, being alert to the consequences of our actions on brothers and sisters far away is not to endorse the circumstances and cultures which bring about those consequences. The Church of England has a responsibility to the people of this country and, like every Province, can order its own affairs to promote its ministry and mission in the local context. But the Anglican Communion is part of our global fellowship in Christ, and the Church of England stands in a special, and sometimes delicate, relationship to other Provinces. It is a Communion bound together by a sense of

responsibility for each other, as much as by its formal instruments. It is also a Communion which, in some of its relationships, carries the scars of old abuses such as colonialism as well as the continuing impediments of global inequality, injustice and poverty.

Balancing the Church of England's responsibilities to the people of the parishes and local communities it serves, and its historical position within the global Anglican Communion, introduces complex and morally challenging tensions – and the issue of sexuality has become a focal point on which future relationships across the whole Communion may turn.

c. The extent and limits of difference

Traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict.

Alasdair MacIntyre

The Church of England's origins extend back centuries before the Reformation and it has always embraced theological and ecclesiological differences – sometimes, but not always, peaceably. As a church which, since the sixteenth century, has understood itself to be both Catholic and Reformed, it has sought to be a church for all the people of England, even across deep religious differences. Further distinctive theological positions have emerged since the Enlightenment so that Anglicanism now draws together a number of distinctive parties and probably many more points of difference. Sometimes the tensions have proved unsustainable, as when Methodism separated to become a new denomination and, throughout Anglican history, individuals have left to join other churches because even a capacious Anglicanism did not adequately embody their beliefs. We have never been a church ruled by a magisterium or one in which dissent has not been tolerated. Anglicanism has always left a great deal of space – but not limitless space – for theological, ethical and ecclesiological diversity.

Tolerance and capaciousness, though part of our history, can never be the last word if a church is to be true to the gospel. The question now testing members of the Church of England and the Anglican Communion is whether the current differences around human sexuality are of the kind which can be accepted as legitimate within the church or whether it is impossible for some to remain in the same church as others whose views are so different as to imply, as they see it, a radically different faith.

The shared conversations are designed, in part, to help us explore these questions together. They start with the premise that sound judgements about others must start with adequate knowledge about who the "other" is and what they actually believe and practise. When members of the church draw different conclusions from their reading of scripture and hold that God's call to his people has implications for conduct and ethics which others within the church dispute strongly, knowing the "other" becomes crucial.

And, whilst the conversations have a crucial dimension which concerns relationships across the Anglican Communion, they also have ecumenical implications at home and abroad. Not that ecumenical relationships all pull in the same direction, but in so far as all Christians share in God's mission to the world, it behoves us to listen carefully to one another as we deliberate on vexed issues.

We cannot, here, explore all the ecumenical ramifications of the Church of England's deliberations on human sexuality. But we are not the only church which is struggling with internal differences about this topic. We have therefore included in the Reader a substantial section from a paper prepared by the Theological Forum of the Church of Scotland for their General Assembly in 2014.

The Church of Scotland debated the question of clergy in same sex relationships at its 2013 General Assembly and the subject was clearly as divisive as it is in the Church of England. The Assembly eventually agreed a motion which affirmed the traditional teaching of the Kirk on

same sex relationships but gave permission for those Kirk Sessions who, in conscience, desired to depart from that teaching and accept ministers in civil partnerships to do so. The Theological Forum was asked to reflect on the ecclesiological implications of what was referred to as a "mixed economy" on this matter. The paper, partly reproduced in the Reader, is the outcome of the Forum's work and offers various historical precedents for holding different views and practices together within one fellowship. It uses the expression "constrained difference" to communicate the tension between openness and boundaries within a community. The paper was accepted by the General Assembly in May 2014, as were proposals to consult all presbyteries on how such a mixed economy might be put into practice. But the prospect that the General Assembly might agree to such moves had already led a number of ministers, elders and members to leave the Kirk.

The Church of Scotland is not, of course, Anglican, although it is the other national church within these islands with an avowed mission to serve all the people of its country. Its theology and ecclesiology are Presbyterian and its history as a church is distinctive, as is the history of Scotland itself. Nevertheless, the paper is of interest to the Church of England as an example of how another church, facing similar divisions and concerned that its mission to the surrounding culture should be both authentic and effective, has tried to tackle the reality of difference.

The paper makes it clear that, at various times in history, churches have accommodated even quite major differences with important doctrinal consequences. The question which both the Church of Scotland and the Church of England are facing now is whether different approaches to human sexuality, and to mission in a social context where sexual ethics are changing rapidly, lend themselves to similar handling.

For the Church of England, the Faith and Order Commission will in due course support the process of shared conversations by producing some reflections on theologically responsible ways of holding difference, diversity and serious disagreement within the common life of the church.

5

Conscience, and Pastoral Accommodation

Respect for conscience has long been a vital element in the church's understanding of its nature. It reflects the belief that God speaks, not only to his people collectively but sometimes individually. It respects the fact that conscience is usually costly and that, whilst the people of God have often benefited from those who speak and act in conscience, they have often taken time to recognise their authenticity.

The vocation to follow conscience, especially in the face of established majority opinion, is a hard calling. Yet the controversies which the church faces on issues of sexuality have already made many demands on the consciences of Christians. Standing out against some of the dominant views of the surrounding culture and facing accusations of homophobia and bigotry has required courage and, often, a reappraisal of cherished relationships with neighbours. And standing out against the church's teaching because, in conscience, it feels impossible to deny the presence of God in the reality of a same sex relationship, has placed some on the very edge of the church which they love and which is part of their most intimate identity. Conscience is not the preserve of any one group or viewpoint.

In a deeply individualistic culture, it is especially important to remember that conscience is not an alibi for one's personal preferences. Consciences are formed from childhood and in the context of the communities of which we are a part – including the church. The

corporate wisdom of the church helps form our consciences and is not, therefore, lightly to be overruled. Yet the church does not claim that it has always and in every circumstance correctly interpreted the word of God for the times. Conscience and the church's teaching have to be considered together even when they are in tension.

Conscience should be respected when it leads someone to believe that they have no alternative but to hold a position or act in a particular way. It comes into play when someone is as certain as they can be about God's demands.

But when different members of the church are driven equally by conscience to pursue widely diverging beliefs and practices, an appeal to conscience alone cannot determine the church's teaching. The Pilling Report, therefore, explored an approach which reflected the difficulty of ascertaining a shared mind whilst seeking to respect personal conscience. It drew on the concept of "pastoral accommodation" which has its roots in Catholic social teaching and was introduced to the group in the presentation by Professor Oliver O'Donovan.

Pastoral accommodation is a way of recognising that not every situation resolves itself into a clear delineation between virtue and vice – people often find themselves caught up in circumstances which fall short of God's intentions and have to make choices which minimise harm or which rescue as much as possible that is good. In such circumstances, the church's pastoral obligations come into play, offering support, prayer and love. A pastoral accommodation is a way of making that pastoral offering without endorsing the circumstances through which the situation arose or giving moral approval to every element in a messy state of affairs.

As Professor O'Donovan noted to the Pilling group, taking no notice of a situation does not do justice to its deeper meaning. Pastoral accommodation addresses the need to "take notice" of the human situation without entailing a final moral judgement upon it (paragraph 276).

The Pilling Report suggested that the concept of pastoral accommodation might offer a way for the church to make a pastoral response to lesbian and gay people who, in conscience, seek to mark their relationships in the context of prayer and the family of the church, but which would not imply that the church has abandoned its teaching on sexuality or marriage (Recommendation 17).

This recommendation has attracted much controversy. Some regard any recognition by the church of same sex relationships as, in reality, amounting to a change in the church's teaching.

Yet the concept of pastoral accommodation was intended by the Pilling group to reflect the enduring nature of the church's teaching whilst recognising that some Christians, in conscience, do not believe that this teaching reflects adequately the love of God in the context of same sex relationships. In other words, pastoral accommodation was intended to maintain the tension between the authority of the church and the demands of conscience.

The participants in the shared conversations may wish to pursue the question of this tension between conscience and the church, and to explore whether the Pilling Report's use of the concept of pastoral accommodation might, or might not, be a helpful way forward.

6

Conflict and Understanding

In discovering the otherness of the other, I find the questions which open up my potential.

T.H. Green

That members of the church disagree sincerely about issues in human sexuality, and especially about homosexuality, is not in question. Sometimes these disagreements have appeared as a stark polarisation between two incompatible theologies and world views but, in reality, there are a number of nuanced positions which do not fall simply into two opposing camps – for example, those who are generally accepting of same sex relationships but remain convinced that "marriage" can only be between a man and a woman (and this is only one example which challenges simplistic binary divisions).

More fundamental, perhaps, is the three-way division between those who regard scripture as completely clear in its prohibition of same sex activity, those whose reading of scripture does not support this level of certainty one way or another, and those who read scripture as offering a positive and inclusive vision of a community of the faithful which embraces those in same sex relationships.

Nor do the traditional Anglican party labels fully capture the range of views. For instance, both authors of the Appendices to the Pilling Report, writing in very different ways about the scriptural arguments, identified themselves as evangelicals. The members of the group who signed off the Report would locate themselves at various points on the

Anglican spectrum. The numerous responses to the Report which have appeared on blogs and websites demonstrate a range of views which do not fall neatly into two categories.

The shared conversations are intended to take participants deeper into these nuances, not to line up two sides in confrontation as if in metaphorical trench warfare. The extent to which this will be possible remains to be seen but much will depend upon the expectations with which participants approach the whole process of conversation.

Ever since the Pilling Report proposed the concept of shared and facilitated conversations, anxieties have been voiced that the process is covertly intended to force the issue one way or another and to promote conformity to one reading of scripture, one approach to the ethics of sexuality and one set of pastoral practices. If participants approach conversations expecting to change the minds of others and fearing that the objective is to force them to change their own minds, no real conversation, in the sense of exploring beliefs and seeking understanding, is likely to take place.

The paradox of conversations of this kind is that they do not require that any participant changes his or her mind. On the other hand, they do require that participants approach the process in a spirit which allows the possibility that their mind may change as a result.

Minds may change – but that would not be a measure, in itself, of the “success” of the conversations.

The conversations are intended to help us find out how much we can agree on, how much difference we can accept in fellow Christians without agreeing, and where we find the limits of agreement to lie.

The more the argument has become polarised, the harder it has become to understand the sincerity with which conflicting views are held. It has also been difficult to understand why those with whom we disagree hold fast to their views. As an example, the relative priority of mission

in the UK on the one hand and global mission on the other may introduce significant tensions which cannot be evaluated until the respective missional priorities are heard and understood. As arguments have become polarised, accusations of bad faith have abounded.

But the experience of the Pilling group was that few, if any, respondents exhibited bad faith or were trivial or superficial in their commitment to the church's calling. Whilst listening to a variety of arguments sometimes clarified for group members why they held the views they did, most also felt that their understanding of those with whom they disagreed had been deepened and that their human and pastoral sympathies had been engaged. That did not bring the group to a position of unanimity, but it enabled its members to disagree constructively. As Sir Joseph Pilling noted in his introduction to the report:

I doubt if there are any two of us who agree in every detail on the ground we have covered. Against that background, it is encouraging that our meetings have been marked by honesty and openness and by love and respect. Our disagreements have been explored in the warmth of a shared faith. To that extent, prayers have been answered and we are grateful to God.

The Archbishop of Canterbury has characterised the objective of the shared conversations as enabling "good disagreement". What might "good disagreement" look like?

7

"Good Disagreement"

If we listen attentively to those with whom we disagree, and speak respectfully to them about our own convictions, yet there is no change of mind on either side, what has been achieved?

Potentially, much that is good might emerge as a result of these conversations, whether minds are changed or not.

If it is possible to recognise an authentic discipleship in the lives, views and practices of others, that will be a gain. If, conversely, conversations enable sharper boundaries to be drawn between groups within the church who cannot in conscience share an ecclesial identity, we will at least know more about the limits of unity. But there are many other potentially beneficial outcomes that may help lead the Church of England into a less uncomfortable and more mission-oriented place.

As the Church of Scotland paper in the Reader makes clear, even quite fundamental differences around doctrine, ethics and practice have sometimes, in the course of the church's long history, been capable of accommodation, especially when a sense of a common mission and vocation are seen as more important than the issue in contention. One possible outcome of shared conversations is that we find ways to articulate a shared vocation so that the deeply held differences about sexuality become less important than the desire to work together for the sake of witness. Until we talk with one another in depth and share the implications of different courses of action, we cannot be sure how far God's will for his church might put mission before agreement.

We may find, after deep conversation and reflection, that levels of certainty, one way or another, have decreased. Exposure to the sincerity of others' views may not change our minds but may make us less sure that we alone know God's mind on this topic. Uncertainty is usually unsettling, and the possibility that the conversations may increase, rather than resolve, uncertainty will not be welcome to everyone. If that were the outcome, it would prompt a new commitment to further weighing and evaluating the church's position. It would, perhaps, usher in a period of more humble and prayerful reflection which drew the issue away from the very public forums in which it has, so far, tended to be debated. One cannot predict where growing uncertainty might lead if such uncertainty were an outcome of the conversations – but it may help to be alert to it as a possibility.

More creative possibilities might ensue if the conversations enable a greater degree of trust to build up between those who disagree. It is a fine line between believing that someone is profoundly wrong and believing that they are therefore malicious in intent. If participants in the conversations can come to trust one another enough to believe that they are all motivated by a desire to follow Christ and to promote the mission of God and of the church, that would be by no means a negligible achievement.

And if the conversations lead to a growing consensus around a particular position, what then? Surely, the value of the shared conversation process would be tested, not by the size of any majority but by the way those who would feel disenfranchised, marginalised or rejected continued to be heard, held and loved. We remain members one of another unless or until anyone chooses to walk away – and even then our care for them does not cease.

Whether the shared conversations lead to change in the church's teaching or practice, or whether they lead to a commitment to no change, many will find the outcome exceedingly hard to bear – others will find it intolerable. A third possibility – that no greater understanding is achieved and the present tensions remain – would

be no less challenging to our relationships and our mission. The church's pastoral response to its members who are hurting will be one measure of its faithfulness.

Yet neither the Church of England, nor the Anglican Communion, are the totality of Christ's church here on earth. Most congregations will know of members who have left to belong to another church which reflects more faithfully their beliefs and priorities. Some have left the Church of England to become Roman Catholics, others to become Quakers or Baptists, for example. Sometimes they leave with acrimony, but often they go with the affirmation and love of those they leave behind, trusting that they are not lost to Christ.

If some decide that there must be a separation (and this is far from a foregone conclusion as the shared conversations begin) then the manner of our parting will also reflect the extent to which we have listened to each other, been open about our convictions and trust in the wideness of God's mercy.

As we set out on a process of conversation, we cannot know where it will take us – if we did, it would not be real conversation. We must pray that all participants will go into the conversations with their eyes open to what is at stake, alert to the implications of the conclusions they may draw, but most of all listening attentively for what the Holy Spirit is saying to the church today.

8

A Gift to a Divided World?

It is not just within the church – and it is not only on issues of sexuality – that positions seem to be becoming more polarised. In numerous areas of public life, opinions are hardening between opposed viewpoints, and the space for reasoned debate is shrinking.

To take an example far removed from sexuality, discussion of the process known as “fracking” has divided communities, scientists and political groups. A statement from the Chair of the church’s Mission and Public Affairs Council, which attempted to set out the pros and cons of fracking, was interpreted by some anti-fracking groups as a pro-fracking statement and by some pro-frackers as an anti-fracking statement. When the Director of MPA discussed the question with a senior academic geo-physicist he was told that this kind of polarisation is becoming more common – even in the natural sciences, it seems, the middle ground and the spaces for evaluating evidence impartially are becoming “vanishingly small”. This was reflected in the experience of the Pilling group when it considered the scientific evidence about same sex attraction – research papers could be adduced which supported contradictory ethical and practical positions.

So the church’s travails about sexuality, important though they are, may not be unique but may owe something to the spirit of the age. Few, however, would regard this trend as a good thing or as a helpful approach to objective truth.

The church’s concern is to discern the mind of God, recognising that the fallibility and sin of humanity obscures God’s image and can lead us into error. Oliver Cromwell articulated this principle when, in 1650,

he wrote to the Synod of the Church of Scotland, "*I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible that you may be mistaken.*" Acknowledging before God the possibility that we may be in error does not entail that we must be wrong – but it should prompt us to contemplate the possibility that we may yet have things to learn from those with whom we disagree. Good disagreement is the reflection in day to day practice of the theological principle that ultimate truth is God's alone.

Arguments for and against the spirit of the age have figured large in the church's disputes about sexuality. But is it possible that the way in which we have pursued our disagreements, with rising acrimony, accusations of bad faith, and little engagement across the divisions, is itself an unconscious concession to a secularising spirit? One objective of the shared conversations is to model something more godly, to the best of our ability.

Passionately held convictions, a concern for justice and a commitment to righteousness will not fade into bland unanimity and consensus after a few hours of talking. But those conversations might enable Christ's church to present a gospel alternative to acrimony and confrontation – a model for understanding and handling human differences and disagreements – which a fractured world desperately needs.

9

A Process for Shared Conversations

How will shared conversations actually take place?

The proposal, endorsed by the House of Bishops, is that the first conversations will happen at the meeting of the College of Bishops in September 2014. This will give the bishops a head start in experiencing the process of shared conversations, experience of working together and with facilitators, and will provide useful feedback on the facilitation process and on the supporting materials.

As well as the bishops, the shared conversations must involve people from across all the dioceses and, in a separate process, the members of the General Synod.

The election of a new Synod in 2015 provides the opportunity to set a new framework for a synodical process around debating substantive and divisive issues, as well as preparing Synod for its responsibilities as the mind of the church is tested on these matters. Two days of the first residential of the new Synod, at York in July 2016, will be set aside for conversations. Outside facilitators will be used, with work in small groups of a size conducive to the nature of the engagement. This would mark the end of the shared conversations process and draw from the circle of conversation across the dioceses which will have taken place during 2015.

For the country-wide process, clusters of dioceses will work together, drawing on the informally defined regional bishops' gatherings.

There will be:

- 12 regional conversations, each running from 10 a.m. on Day 1 to 4 p.m. on Day 2 (food, accommodation and travel for participants will be paid for).
- a total of 60 participants drawn from the dioceses in the regional cluster; and
- a team of 7 facilitators at each event, drawn from a pool of up to 20 recruited to facilitate the whole series of conversations.

Over the course of the series, the facilitation team will meet for three days of training and assessment of the process.

The facilitators will be trained and experienced in this kind of work. In fraught encounters between people in conflict, where there is considerable anxiety and vulnerability, there will inevitably be fears about whether facilitators will themselves have views which might skew the process towards certain outcomes.

The facilitators will be chosen for their professionalism. They will have had extensive experience of working to make good conversation possible and will be acutely aware of their own responsibility to all the participants. Nobody comes "from nowhere", but any private views – political, theological, scriptural or social – that the facilitators might have (and they may come from many different points on the compass of beliefs) will be put aside in order that the conversations may be truly shared between the participants. This requires a degree of trust "up front" from all concerned, but experienced facilitators will know that the integrity of the process is all-important and will know how to give participants the reassurance that the process will be fair to every viewpoint and position.

Selecting the Participants for Regional Conversations

Responsibility for deciding who will take part in the regional conversations will rest solely with each diocesan bishop – but they will work within the following guidelines.

1. Responsibility rests with the diocesan bishop.
2. It would be useful for some clergy and lay members of General Synod to experience the regional process also. This should be limited to one from each diocese. Therefore 43 Synod members, in addition to bishops, will bring this experience to the Synod process in July 2016.
3. The diocesan bishop will decide whether he or she, and the bishops who have experienced the conversations in the College of Bishops, should be part of the regional conversations.
4. Apart from the bishops, the other participants in the regional conversations should be 50/50 ordained and lay.
5. There should be a 50/50 male–female ratio and at least 25% should be under 40.
6. The balance of opinion across any diocesan delegation should reflect the balance of the views held across the diocese.
7. LGBTI people should be represented with two or three in each diocesan delegation.

Some Questions to Consider in Conversation

There is no set structure for the shared conversations, and the suggested questions below are not some kind of “exam paper” which must be answered by the end. But it can be helpful to start with an idea of the kind of questions which might form the basis of conversation, even if the dynamic of the encounter takes a direction of its own and throws up different topics for discussion.

Given the expected range of views among the participants, the subject which brings them together and the context of the issues within the church, questions of the kind listed below might well arise during the conversations.

1. What is the church’s missionary task today in relation to LGBTI people, and to the culture within which we are called to witness and minister?
2. More specifically, given that same sex marriages are now taking place, what should our pastoral and missional response be to married same sex couples who seek to be part of the life of our church locally?
3. Reflecting on the biblical scholarship in the Reader (and perhaps on the two Appendices about scripture in the Pilling Report), is there anything in this material which causes you to think afresh – whether to deepen your commitment to a position or to challenge it?

4. Is there anything in that material which causes you to take more seriously the position of those with whom you disagree – not necessarily to change your mind but to recognise the quality of study and reflection on which other views are founded?
5. What of the gospel is to be found in "the other view"?
6. How might parish churches in England reflect upon the responsibilities of being part of the worldwide Anglican Communion, in ways which remain true to their vocation to witness to God effectively in their local context?
7. How might we discern the extent, and the limits, of difference that can be accommodated within the church? Is the Church of Scotland's concept of "constrained difference" helpful?
8. Might the concept of "pastoral accommodation" help us to honour the consciences of fellow Christians whilst recognising that the church's present teaching on sexuality has not changed?
9. Should the church offer prayers to mark the formation of a faithful, permanent, same sex relationship? If so, what is the right level of formal provision that should be made?
10. Recognising the fact of profound disagreement within the church, can we find a way together to make the manner of our encounter with each other a gift to a broken world, and not a scandal?

12

Beginning and Ending with Mission

*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him may not perish
but may have eternal life.*

John 3:16

God's love for the world is our starting point and the reason why the church exists. The current controversies about sexuality remain intense and conflictual because a lot of Christians believe that the subject matters profoundly for the sake of the world and for the sake of people's immortal souls. Our mission – God's mission – in the world will be shaped by the conclusions we draw and, most of all, by the way we engage with one another. It is right that the whole process of shared conversations should take place within a context of mission, and although (to echo the Pilling Report) that in itself does not determine any particular outcomes, it sharply highlights the fact that none of our discussions are purely "internal".

Resource materials such as those outlined here can only take a process on its first tiny, faltering, steps. What follows is in the hands – and the heads and hearts – of the participants. It will be task of the whole church to hold them all, along with the facilitation team, in love and prayer.

Prayer and the Shared Conversations

Meaningful conversation within the church – especially when the conversations are about our differences – should be firmly grounded in prayer.

This short booklet opened with the words of the Peace from the Communion Service, verses from scripture and a prayer. We offer below two further well-known prayers which seem especially apposite for these shared conversations and commend them for use within the process, recognising that the groups will wish to set their encounters within a more structured context of prayer and worship designed for their own circumstances.

*God of compassion,
whose Son Jesus Christ, the child of Mary,
shared the life of a home in Nazareth,
and on the cross drew the whole human family to himself:
strengthen us in our daily living
that in joy and in sorrow
we may know the power of your presence
to bind together and to heal;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
In the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.*

Amen.

Common Worship
Collect for Mothering Sunday

*Almighty God,
who sent your Holy Spirit
to be the life and light of your Church:
open our hearts to the riches of your grace,
that we may bring forth the fruit of the Spirit
in love and joy and peace;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.*

Amen.

Common Worship
Collect for the Ninth Sunday after Trinity