In a presentation to the General Synod ahead of small group work on the House of Bishops Report, Graham James, the Bishop of Norwich has charted the recent history of the Church of England on issues of sexuality.
Beginning with the Church's support of the Wolfenden Report and the campaign to decriminalise homosexuality - led by the then Archbishop of Canterbury - in 1957 through to the criticism of General Synod in November 1987 by popular media for being "too liberal" after passing a motion which restated the Church's traditional teaching.

Bishop Graham James brought the recent history up to date noting "the tension which can exist between our determination to uphold firmly the teaching on marriage and sexual relationships as currently expressed in our Canons, and the commitment to affirm the place of LGBTI people within the Church, and, as paragraph 34 of the report says, to enable their voices to be heard."

In his presentation the Bishop of Norwich also noted he had been involved in discussing same sex relationships for over forty years of ordained ministry: "As a curate in the late 1970s I recall leading a deanery synod discussion on the Gloucester Report on homosexual relationships. No one else was willing to do it. Little did I think that almost forty years later I'd be standing before the General Synod presenting another report on the same subject. It is a very provisional report, as it says of itself. Like others which have gone before it, it has not received a rapturous reception in all quarters, and I regret any pain or anger it may have caused."

Referring to the House of Bishop's report itself, Bishop Graham said:

"I would be misleading you if I did not confess to being conflicted in presenting this report but in that I think I am far from alone among the bishops and in the wider Church of England.......Our own history in dealing with these matters also explains why people on all sides of the debate rarely find themselves satisfied."

In his speech ahead of the group work the Bishop of Willesden, Pete Broadbent, also commented on the Report and its reception on social and wider media:

"We haven't suppressed the diversity of understanding and the range of views that exist in the House and College. What we have tried to do is come to a common mind - an expression of where the House's thinking has got to. It's a pretty conservative document, but is owned by the whole House and the vast majority of the College. So it would be wrong to suggest that this is a constipated exercise in maintaining a false unity among us."

Bishop Pete also spoke ahead of the debate itself of the consequences of any vote:

"I do need to reiterate the factual position about what it means to "take note". As I said at the launch of the Report "such a debate is on a neutral motion. It allows Synod to discuss the content and recommendations contained in the report, but a vote in favour of the motion does not commit the Synod to the acceptance of any matter in the report." Of course, not taking note has become totemic for many members of Synod. If Synod declines to take note, the report in its present form cannot come back to us - though we will still have to find a way forward for the discussion....We will want members to address what we have put before you in all good faith, whether you like what we have said or not. It would be good if Synod agreed to take note. We're not claiming that our Report is the last word. It's a situation report. It represents where our thinking has got to. Taking note doesn't commit you to our thinking."
The Bishop of Willesden concluded by saying:

"We lack a consensus on what we mean by "good disagreement" - is it about process or is it about outcomes? I think that many who want change believe that it's possible, on the basis of good disagreement, to have pluriformity of practice in the Church. Others don't believe that it's possible to live in that way because of the canonical and legal constraints of uniformity that exist in our Church.

We will find this debate a continuing source of disagreement because we haven't coalesced around an end point. When we legislated for women to be bishops, even those opposed came to the view that the Church of England had to make it possible for women to be bishops in the Church of God according to our canons and formularies. In this debate, we haven't even begun to find a place where we can coalesce. The Bishops' Report acknowledges a place of starting. More conversation is needed. We don't yet know the next stage - nor yet when and whether we can bring any further report to Synod. Please make the fullest possible use of the groups and the debate to enable those deliberations."

ENDS

The full text of the presentations can be read below:

- The Bishop of Norwich
- The Bishop of Willesden

The debate on the report takes place later this afternoon and is due to conclude at about 7pm.