

The Church of England's law and guidance on marriage should be interpreted to provide "maximum freedom" for gay and lesbian people without changing the Church's doctrine of marriage itself, bishops are recommending.

A report from the House of Bishops to be discussed by the Church's General Synod next month upholds the teaching, recognised by canon law, that marriage is the lifelong union of one man and one woman.

But it also concludes that the current advice on pastoral provision for same-sex couples - which allows clergy to provide informal prayers for those marrying or forming a civil partnership - is not clear enough and should be revisited.

It also calls for a "fresh tone and culture of welcome and support" for lesbian and gay people and those attracted to people of the same sex throughout the Church of England.

The paper recommends that bishops prepare a substantial new teaching document on marriage and relationships to replace or expand upon documents drawn up in the 1990s.

And it calls for new guidance to be prepared about the kind of questions put to candidates for ordination - irrespective of their sexual orientation - about their lifestyle.

It also speaks of the need for the Church to repent of the homophobic attitudes it has sometimes failed to rebuke and affirm the need to stand against homophobia wherever and whenever it is to be found.

The report from the House of Bishops attempts to sum up the Church's position after a two-year process of shared conversations on the subject of human sexuality, involving clergy and laity.

It acknowledges that it represents the consensus of opinion among the bishops rather than a unanimous view and sets out a process rather than attempting a final resolution.

The General Synod will discuss the paper in a "Take Note" debate on the afternoon of Wednesday February 15.

Members will have an opportunity to consider it in small groups immediately before the debate.

In a foreword to the document, the bishops explain: "We recognise our deficiencies and offer this paper with humility.

"We know that this report may prove challenging or difficult reading.

"We are confident, however, that the commitment that has been shown to listening to one another, not least through the Shared Conversations, in dioceses and in the General Synod, will have helped prepare us all as members of Synod to address together the challenges we face as a part of the One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

"We would ask for it to be read as a whole."

Presenting the paper at a press conference this morning the Bishop of Norwich, the Rt Rev Graham James said: "This isn't the end of a process but we are somewhere in the middle of it.

"We are sharing where we have reached in order to be as transparent as possible, and open to other voices.

"We hope that the tone and register of this report will help to commend it, though we recognise it will be challenging reading for some.

"This is no last word on this subject. For there are very different views on same sex relationships within the Church, and within the House of Bishops, mainly based on different understandings of how to read scripture."

The Bishop of Willesden, the Rt Rev Pete Broadbent, said: "The report will be the subject of a 'take note' debate. Such a debate is 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.

"The House of Bishops will listen carefully to the debate, and to any subsequent matters raised by members in correspondence, to inform their further work."

The report is contained among papers circulated to members of the Church of England's General Synod which meets in Westminster next month.

Other newly released papers include background papers ahead of debates on the reading of banns of marriage and fixed odds betting terminals.

Papers sent out in an earlier circulation last week included further updates on the process of simplification of Church regulations as well as material on the 500th anniversary of the Reformation and a background document on clergy risk assessment regulations which will be debated on Thursday February 16.

The General Synod will meet at the Assembly Hall, Church House, 27 Great Smith Street, Westminster, London from 3pm on Monday February 13 to 5.15pm on Thursday 16 February.

Notes to editors

The comments from the Bishop of Norwich and Bishop of Willesden are below.

A statement from the Bishop of Norwich:

When reports to the General Synod are launched at a press briefing they are often published at the end of a process and contain recommendations. This report on marriage and same sex relationships from the House of Bishops isn't that sort of report. It describes where the bishops have reached in their reflections. It goes on to provide a framework identifying areas where we believe present advice, policies or practice need further consideration, and invites members of General Synod and the wider Church, to contribute. So this isn't the end of a process but we are somewhere in the middle of it. We are sharing where we have reached in order to be as transparent as possible, and open to other voices.

We hope that the tone and register of this report will help to commend it, though we recognise it will be challenging reading for some. This is no last word on this subject. For there are very different views on same sex relationships within the Church, and within the House of Bishops, mainly based on different understandings of how to read scripture. The House is agreed, however, that our present teaching documents do not address some elements of the contemporary situation regarding marriage and relationships in our culture. I refer to the current teaching document on marriage, issued by the House of Bishops in 1999, and an earlier document on same sex relationships, *Issues in Human Sexuality*. Neither discusses nor even anticipates same sex marriage, a reminder of just how quickly things have changed. *Issues*, published in 1991, was written when Clause 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 was in force. It prohibited the promotion of homosexuality in schools and prevented local councils from spending money on lesbian and gay projects including anything which suggested support of what it called "pretended family relationships". The temper of the time in which *Issues* was written was a very different one from ours. The later teaching document from 1999 simply assumes marriage is the union of one man with one woman. Hence, the House of Bishops believes it needs to commission a new teaching document which articulates such an understanding of marriage within a theology of relationships for our changed times. This report isn't that document but it indicates why it is needed.

The House of Bishops believes that the Church of England's teaching on marriage, which it holds in common with the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Churches, and the majority of the churches of the Reformation, should continue to be expressed in the terms found in Canon B30, namely that "the Church of England affirms, according to our Lord's teaching, that marriage is a union permanent and life-long, of one man with one woman..." But there is a great deal more than marriage alone to be considered in relation to same sex relationships. The report affirms the place of lesbian and gay people within the Church. Even in 1991 *Issues in Human Sexuality* said that those in same sex partnerships should be included within the life and fellowship of the Church. We reaffirm that gladly and decisively, recognising that for Christians our identity in Christ is

primary, and of greater significance than gender, sexuality, age, nationality or any other characteristic. So no change in doctrine is proposed but it is often pastoral practice - how we treat people - which matters most. This means - as the report suggests - establishing across the Church of England a fresh tone and culture of welcome and support for lesbian and gay people, for those who experience same sex attraction, and for their families, and continuing to work toward mutual love and understanding on these issues across the Church. And so we speak in the report about re-examining the existing framework of our pastoral practice to permit maximum freedom within it. We recognise two areas in particular where advice in relation to the pastoral care and support of lesbian and gay people needs fresh thought.

At present clergy are advised that they may offer "informal prayer" to those registering civil partnerships or entering same sex marriage. The parameters of such pastoral support are unclear. The House proposes that there should be more guidance for clergy about appropriate pastoral provision for same sex couples.

The House of Bishops also believes present arrangements for asking ordinands and clergy about their relationships and lifestyle are not working well. It's felt that there's too much concentration on whether ordinands or clergy are in sexually active same sex relationships rather than framing questions about sexual morality within a much wider examination of the way in which all ordinands and clergy order their lives. The Church of England has always been suspicious of intrusive interrogation of its members, preferring to trust clergy and lay people in their Christian discipleship. However, all clergy are asked at their ordination whether they will fashion their lives "after the way of Christ". We believe we should revisit how this is explored beforehand so that the same questions are addressed to all.

At the General Synod next month I will give an address exploring why we believe some of our formulations on pastoral practice do not now seem adequate. The Bishop of Willesden, as Vice Chair of the Bishops' Reflection Group, will introduce some case studies which members of Synod will examine in groups so that we consider the lived experience of people within our Church. Later there will be a take note debate on the report. We hope that in the groups and in the debate much will be offered to the House of Bishops for its further work in this area. I will now pass over to the Bishop of Willesden who will speak about the process in the House of Bishops over the past few months, and the Synodical process which lies before us.

A statement on process from the Bishop of Willesden:

This report evolved through discussion, study and reflection at meetings of both the House of Bishops (the Bishops who are members of General Synod) and the College of Bishops (all the currently serving Bishops of the Church of England). The Reflections Group took the raw material from those discussions to produce the document that is going to Synod. Some of the most useful and fruitful reflection came from our own group work as we discussed real life case studies, and, as the Bishop of Norwich has indicated, we shall be offering group work based on similar case studies to members of General Synod in February. We anticipate that the groups will enable further good listening and thoughtful reflection

across the Synod between people of a diversity of viewpoints.

The report will then be the subject of a "take note" debate. Such a debate is 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. The House of Bishops will listen carefully to the debate, and to any subsequent matters raised by members in correspondence, to inform their further work.

This may well include matters such as the teaching document and the guidance to clergy on pastoral provision.

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