

## **General Synod**

**Wednesday February 15<sup>th</sup> 2017**

**Presentation prior to the group work on case studies and GS2055**

**Introduction by The Bishop of Norwich**

Members of Synod, in this presentation the Bishop of Willesden will follow what I have to say by focussing on the group process this afternoon and what it is hoped may be gained from it. I will introduce the report GS2055 later.

Now I want to attempt a wider and longer perspective, and why I hope the case studies may prove useful. For almost the whole of the forty-one years of my ordained ministry we seem to have been discussing same sex relationships. 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.

Next week I will have been a bishop for twenty-four years. Throughout that time I have cherished the friendships of many gay people and sought to support the gay clergy in my diocese and tried to make it a safe and welcoming place for their ministry. Only they can say whether they feel that's true. But I know the Church of England owes them much. Some minister in our most challenging parishes and situations. I am also a bishop who seeks to be loyal to the Catholic tradition of our church and to the doctrine of the universal Church as we have received it. I do not seek to elevate my opinion and experience above that of scripture and the received tradition of the Church. I've learned much too from evangelical clergy and laity who have frequently challenged

me in my understanding of scripture. The promises made at my episcopal consecration remain with me on a daily basis. I do accept the holy scriptures as revealing all things necessary for eternal salvation. I do believe the doctrine of the Christian faith as the Church of England has received it, and seek to expound and teach it. I do seek to uphold the truth of the Gospel against error, and to promote unity, peace and love among the people I serve. Those things weigh heavily with me and my fellow bishops. They are, of course, a liberation not a burden for as bishops we know how much we have been given, how much we have received and how much we have still to learn through the grace of Christ.

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. At one level nothing much seems to have changed since I made that presentation on the Gloucester Report so many years ago. And yet at another level everything seems to have changed, especially in the wider culture. Our own history in dealing with these matters also explains why people on all sides of the debate rarely find themselves satisfied. I want to spend some time examining that history.

Perhaps it is because we are so conflicted that the House of Bishops found case studies valuable. They based our conversations in the lived experience of the Church. For the case studies we used were grounded in real life events. Of course, there is pastoral distance since the events are anonymised and the people are not in the room with us. A pastoral response is invited and our response reveals how our theological formation shapes it. Indeed, we may discover that our pastoral response begins to re-shape our theological convictions. There is always a dialogue between doctrine and pastoral practice. Sometimes it lies within us.

Among the things the case studies revealed to the bishops was the breadth of pastoral responses which lay within the present disciplines of the church. Sometimes it is our own pastoral imagination which is lacking rather than pastoral possibilities. That's what led to the use of the phrase "maximum freedom" in relation to the interpretation of existing law and guidance. We began to believe there were more possibilities for development within our present disciplines than may have been perceived.

I will say more about that when introducing the debate later today. In this session I want to reflect on why the narrative of our discussions on human sexuality has been so testing over the years and why it remains so.

One of the reasons is that we do not start – and perhaps cannot start - our discussions from scratch nor even from the scriptures, but largely from two key statements, both of which have remained in place from the period 1987 to 1991. Those statements did not begin to anticipate the wider situation in society we now experience with the advent of same sex marriage.

The story goes back well before 1987. The Wolfenden Report, chaired by an eminent Anglican layman, was published in 1957. Its key recommendation was that homosexual acts between consenting adults should cease to be a criminal offence. A whole decade passed before the Sexual Offences Act reached the statute book, fifty years ago this year. The campaign for change received strong support from the Archbishop of Canterbury and most of the bishops at the time. Michael Ramsey was clear there was a distinction between a crime and a sin.

Some of the opponents of decriminalisation said that the bishops were being naïve if they thought a change in the law would not lead to the promotion of homosexuality and its eventual acceptance as an alternative lifestyle. As it was, Norman Pittenger's *Time for Consent* was published in 1970,

arguing within the Christian community for the moral worth of same sex relationships. A growing acceptance of homosexual lifestyles was well reflected in the Gloucester Report *Homosexual Relationships: a contribution to discussion* published by the Board for Social Responsibility in 1979, and the subject of my deanery synod discussion all those years ago. The sub title '*a contribution to discussion*' is worth noting. There was a general reluctance to opine and define in this area within the Church of England at the time.

The Lambeth Conferences of 1978 and 1988 were the first to have resolutions directly referring to homosexuality. Those resolutions are now almost entirely forgotten. The 1988 Lambeth Conference spoke about the need for a '*deep and dispassionate study of the question of homosexuality, which would take seriously both the teaching of scripture and the results of scientific and medical research*'. I'm not sure we have yet been attentive enough to scientific and medical research.

The possibility, even by then, of a dispassionate study of same sex relationships was a vain hope. Within the Church of England things became more complicated in the 1980s. The bishops continued to be content with contributions to discussion but there was a discernible shift of opinion in the public mind. Despite her reputation for moral certainties, Margaret Thatcher was not at all morally censorious in sexual matters. But there was a spirit of reaction around, fed not least by the popular media of the time which was hostile to homosexual relationships. This eventually led to the passage of Clause 28 in the Local Government Act 1988 which prohibited the promotion of homosexuality in schools and stopped local councils spending money supporting lesbian and gay projects. It also prevented the support of what it called '*pretended family relationships*', namely same sex partners having a normal family life.

While all this was building up the House of Bishops looked to the Board for Social Responsibility for further advice on matters to do with homosexuality. A working party was formed in 1986 under the leadership of the present Dean of Salisbury, June Osborne. It reported in 1989, but the report was never published at the time, because things had moved on in ways which I expect a number of the bishops then wished they hadn't. Tony Higton's Private Members Motion in the General Synod in November 1987 caught something of the spirit of the age. For the first time as far as I can discover, an authoritative body in the Church of England officially pronounced on the moral worth of homosexual relationships. It was argued that it simply restated traditional teaching, though it did so in the terse terms of a General Synod motion. That motion stated that sexual intercourse properly belongs within marriage and that fornication and adultery are sins against this ideal, as are homosexual genital acts which are to be met by a call to repentance and the exercise of compassion. Finally it declared that '*all Christians are called to be exemplary in all matters of morality, including sexual morality; and that holiness of life is particularly required of Christian leaders*'.

Nearly everything that has happened in the Church of England on these issues since then has been in reaction to that motion. The vote in Synod at the time in favour was overwhelming – 403 votes to 8. What we are liable to forget is the reaction in some of the popular media to the passing of that vote. It was to criticise the Church for being too liberal. Since I was sitting behind the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1987, I remember the vote and its aftermath well. Some of you may remember the tabloid headlines which used language which would be unthinkable today in any sector of the press. The House of Bishops had to respond. They did so eventually with the publication of *Issues in Human Sexuality: a statement by the House of Bishops* in 1991. In his foreword the Archbishop of Canterbury, by then George Carey, famously said it was not the last word on the subject. *Issues* was intended to help, in its own words, a general process, '*marked by greater trust and openness*', of Christian reflection on the subject of human sexuality. We are now

further in time from the publication of *Issues in Human Sexuality* than the publication of *Issues* was from the decriminalisation of homosexuality in this land.

*Issues* was not to be the last word but it became policy. This is one of the most surprising developments, given what *Issues* said about itself. Fairly quickly in the 1990s candidates for episcopal office had to pledge their loyalty to it. In time all ordinands had to pledge willingness to live within the disciplines set out in *Issues*, and they still do. *Issues* famously picked up on the Higton motions phrase about exemplary Christian leaders. The Ordinal is clear about the way in which the clergy are called to embody the way of Christ in their lives and to acknowledge the teaching of the Christian faith as the Church of England has received it. Notwithstanding all this, *Issues* has frequently been criticised, even if sometimes unfairly, for creating different moral standards for clergy and lay people. What was significant about *Issues* was that it was clear that lay people who did conscientiously dissent and lived in same sex relationships should be incorporated fully within the life of the Church. Sometimes it is assumed that when ordinands are asked if they will live within the disciplines of *Issues* it is simply about whether they will remain celibate if in a same sex relationship. The disciplines of *Issues* also include the welcome given to lay people who do enter same sex partnerships to be part of the Body of Christ on the same basis as everyone else. The teaching and guidance in *Issues* formed the framework for the House of Bishops' pastoral statement on civil partnerships issued in 2005. There was a further statement on episcopal ministry in 2013 which said that any gay or lesbian person living within the disciplines outlined in *Issues* and in a partnership could become a bishop. Then in February 2014 there was a further statement from the House in relation to same sex marriage.

These different statements were attempts to respond to a vastly changed landscape but within the disciplines articulated in 1991. *Issues* did not begin to glimpse civil partnerships let alone same sex

marriage which is why the House of Bishops believes a new teaching document is needed, addressing both marriage and same-sex relationships in a way which has not been attempted.

What the case studies seek to do is to present us with 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. While it is certainly beyond my pay grade to chart the way forward, I have always taken the view that the Reflection Group I chaired was responsibly simply for the process in the College and the House at this initial stage. Any group drafting the teaching document would need to draw its membership from beyond the House, including lesbian and gay people, theologians, parish clergy and others. Equally a group on the development of pastoral practice would also need broad representation.

The case studies in the House and College of Bishops prompted conversations of very different character and quality on this subject than we have had in my long memory of such meetings. The House believed it would be helpful for members of the General Synod to engage in a similar process. I will now pass directly to the Bishop of Willesden to describe in more detail what we will do in this afternoon's session.