

GENERAL SYNOD

Next Steps on Human Sexuality

Following the February 2017 Group of Sessions, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York issued a letter on 16th February outlining their proposals for continuing to address, as a church, questions concerning human sexuality. The Archbishops committed themselves and the House of Bishops to two new strands of work: the creation of a Pastoral Advisory Group and the development of a substantial Teaching Document on the subject.

This paper outlines progress toward the realisation of these two goals.

Introduction

1. Members of the General Synod will come back to the subject of human sexuality with very clear memories of the debate and vote on the paper from the House of Bishops (GS 2055) at the February 2017 group of sessions.
2. Responses to GS 2055 before and during the Synod debate in February underlined the point that the 'subject' of human sexuality can never simply be an 'object' of consideration for us, because it is about us, all of us, as persons whose being is in relationship. Yes, there are critical theological issues here that need to be addressed with intellectual rigour and a passion for God's truth, with a recognition that in addressing them we will touch on deeply held beliefs that it can be painful to call into question. It must also be kept constantly in mind, however, that whatever we say here relates directly to fellow human beings, to their experiences and their sense of identity, to their lives and to the loves that shape and sustain them. If we would presume to say anything on this subject, we must know that we are talking about and talking to people, with their immense capacities for joy and for pain, created in the divine image and precious in God's sight in ways we can barely begin to fathom.
3. It fell to us, as Archbishops, to respond to the debate, and in our letter of 16th February we committed ourselves, and the whole House of Bishops, to two actions. The first of these was the creation of a group, chaired by the Bishop of Newcastle, to advise dioceses on pastoral issues concerning human sexuality so that we can make explicit our commitment to show the love of Christ to all people, regardless of sexual or gender identity. Good progress has been made in establishing the new Pastoral Advisory Group, as reported below, which is now embarking on its work.
4. The second action to which we committed ourselves was to produce a new episcopal teaching document on human sexuality. We know that, however vital our pastoral practice, part of the reason these subjects remain so problematic within the church of Christ concerns deep disagreements regarding the understanding of scripture, Christian doctrine, Christian ethics, and the nature of the church, including the particular character of the Church of England. At the same time, we are a church that rejoices to unite in worship and witness, and in doing so holds together a remarkable range of perspectives and approaches. We know that this both reflects and expresses deep agreement on scripture, doctrine, ethics and the nature of the church – without denying the seriousness of our controversies and conflicts. We also know that all parts of the Church of England can learn so much from listening to one another, to the communities and the society that we are called to serve, and to the findings of those

who are committed to rigorous academic standards of research in their various fields. None of us holds the whole picture, and all of us can grow in understanding.

5. Hence this second commitment, which will involve bringing together many minds, many voices, many areas of expertise and many different skills, to produce an episcopal teaching document on human sexuality. We promised, back in February, that this process would reflect a *“radical new Christian Inclusion, ... founded in scripture, in reason, in tradition, in theology and the Christian faith as the Church of England has received it.”* This is a formidable undertaking. It will be costly, not only financially and in terms of people’s time, but in terms of the process of exploring together on matters that touch the very nature of our being. But nothing less will address the matter with the seriousness, the depth of wisdom and the diversity of possible approaches that should characterise authentic Christian exploration of the mystery of our humanity, of which our sexuality is an integral dimension.
6. We do not expect the teaching document, or the process of writing it, to achieve reconciliation of all views across the Church of England. Such reconciliation, were it to happen, would be the work of the Holy Spirit, not of human hands or brains. But we need our internal debates to be grounded in the best available scholarship, across many disciplines and to draw in the perspectives of people in all their difference. And we need the whole process to happen prayerfully, and with the supportive prayers of our fellow Christians across the world. If the teaching document can express clearly the ground on which we are agreed – and be very clear about where we disagree, and why – it will have done its work well.
7. Below, we share with Synod the progress we have made to date in assembling the resources and people to deliver the teaching document. There is some way to go before the thematic working groups will have been brought together. Synod will understand that achieving balanced group membership is a complex process and that it would be fruitless to report on part-completed processes. When the membership of the groups is known, we will share that information – although it is also important to note that all the groups are charged with consulting beyond their own membership.
8. Synod members will not need reminding that both these areas for action were put forward in GS 2055. What has changed? The difference is that, in the light of the debate in February, we have become clearer about the scale and seriousness of the task and the need to define our terms with greater rigour – not least in pursuing the goal of radical Christian inclusion as we described it in our letter of 16th February. We, and the whole House of Bishops, mindful of the voices heard in Synod and across the church beyond it, are wholly committed to making the process outlined below work well. It is not a panacea. It is not guaranteed to deliver any specific outcome or to please anyone let alone everyone. But it is, we believe, the only way for us, as part of Christ’s church, to explore the mind of Christ together, knowing that, despite our disagreements, we are charged to preach Christ – crucified, risen, ascended and glorified – to all the people of the world.

Pastoral Advisory Group

1. *As Archbishops we will be establishing a Pastoral Oversight group led by the Bishop of Newcastle, with the task of supporting and advising Dioceses on pastoral actions with regard to our current pastoral approach to human sexuality. The group will be inclusive, and will seek to discern the development of pastoral practices, within current arrangements.*

Archbishops' letter, February 16th 2017

Aim

2. Supporting and advising Dioceses on pastoral actions, i.e. engagement, inclusion, and pastoral care, with regard to the current pastoral approach of the Church to human sexuality, with a particular (but not exclusive) focus on same-sex couples.

Responsibilities

3. Reviewing, and as needed revising, advice provided by the House of Bishops on pastoral ministry to same-sex couples in Church of England congregations, such ministry being understood to include prayer offered by clergy and licensed lay ministers.
4. Offering advice when requested to bishops regarding specific cases they are dealing with in the areas of both pastoral care and discipline involving clergy in same-sex relationships, and clergy responding to lay people in same-sex relationships, to assist the sharing of knowledge and an appropriate level of national consistency in approach.
5. Supporting the Church of England's communication of its approach to this area in the media and in other public fora.
6. Exploring together, and hearing from others, what radical Christian Inclusion, '*founded in scripture, in reason, in tradition, in theology and the Christian faith as the Church of England has received it.*'¹, means in the life and mission of the Church: sharing and disseminating examples of good practice in terms of pastoral care of and engagement with those who identify as LGBTI.

Key tasks

7. To bring draft advice on pastoral ministry to same-sex couples in Church of England congregations for initial consideration by the House of Bishops, having reflected on how pastoral practices might develop within current teaching.
8. To review the advice provided in due course in the light of the emerging teaching document.

Way of working

9. Requests from other bishops for advice on named cases with regard to area of responsibility (2) above will need to be dealt with as reserved business by the bishops

¹ From the Archbishops' Letter, 16th February 2017

within the group. The bishops will however report to other group members that such reserved business has been discussed and will review with them any general issues arising from the review of particular cases.

Time scale

10. The advice on pastoral ministry to same-sex couples will need to be undertaken in careful liaison with work on the teaching document (as set out below). It is therefore difficult to give a precise timescale for the groups work.

11. Members will be appointed initially to serve on the group until the end of 2019.

Membership

Chair: The Bishop of Newcastle, The Rt Revd Christine Hardman

Other Episcopal Members: The Bishop of Willesden, The Rt Revd Pete Broadbent

The Bishop of Grantham, The Rt Revd Dr Nicholas Chamberlain

The Bishop of Exeter, The Rt Revd Robert Atwell

The Bishop of Repton, The Rt Revd Jan McFarlane

Members: The Revd Sam Allberry

Dr Jamie Harrison

The Ven Cherry Vann

The Revd Dr Rosemarie Mallett

Staff support: The Revd Dr Malcolm Brown

The Revd Dr Jeremy Worthen

The Legal Office.

Episcopal Teaching Document Group

1. *(W)e, with others, will be formulating proposals for the May House of Bishops for a large scale teaching document around the subject of human sexuality. In an episcopal church a principal responsibility of Bishops is the teaching ministry of the church, and the guarding of the deposit of faith that we have all inherited. The teaching document must thus ultimately come from the Bishops. However, all episcopal ministry must be exercised with all the people of God, lay and ordained, and thus our proposals will ensure a wide ranging and fully inclusive approach, both in subject matter and in those who work on it.*

Archbishops' letter, February 16th 2017

Aim

2. To produce a major teaching document on marriage and sexuality which will be endorsed by the whole House of Bishops for commendation to the Church of England.
3. The teaching document should include, *inter alia*:
 - a summary of the church's tradition regarding marriage and sexual relationships, including its scriptural and theological foundations;
 - an indication of how this tradition has adapted and been sustained through periods of radical social change;
 - an analysis of rapidly changing social and familial structures over recent decades and the role of marriage in securing social goods in times of fluidity;
 - reflections on contemporary understandings of human sexuality and the contribution of other disciplines, especially the sciences;
 - a summary of the social trends which have led to the desire for faithful, permanent same-sex relationships to be recognised and celebrated publicly, and the church's theological and practical responses to the advent of Civil Partnerships and Equal Marriage;
 - theological and ethical reflections on the pastoral and missional imperatives for the church in the light of these developments;
 - guidance for members of the Church of England on the spiritual and theological importance of marriage, on options for Christians in their sexual and familial relationships, and on relationships with those who are in other relationship structures.
 - clarity about the extent, and limits, of consensus within the church – mapping the areas where we continue to disagree.

Structure, process and membership

4. The scale of this venture means that it cannot be achieved by a single group of manageable size. The overall task will therefore be overseen by a **Co-ordinating**

Group whose episcopal members will be responsible for bringing a final text to the House for approval and who will be advised by a standing group of Core Consultant Members (clergy and laity). This group will also consult widely beyond its own membership.

5. The range of topics the Teaching Document must cover demands a number of more specialised groups each exploring a particular theme or themes. The Co-ordinating Group will be responsible for ensuring the coherence of this work and will be regularly updated on the groups' work.
6. Each **Thematic Working Group** will be episcopally chaired and the bishops concerned are listed below. It will take time to appoint members to each group who combine the required knowledge and expertise with the necessary range of views and other representative characteristics. The full membership of the thematic groups will be announced as soon as the membership of each has been confirmed.

Timescale

7. The aim is to finalise the Teaching Document by early 2020. The House will give regular updates on progress to Synod as the work develops.

Co-ordinating Group

Chair: The Bishop of Coventry, The Rt Revd Christopher Cocksworth

Episcopal Members: The Bishop of Salisbury, The Rt Revd Nick Holtam
The Bishop of Dorking, The Rt Revd Dr Jo Bailey Wells
The Bishop of Hull, The Rt Revd Alison White
The Bishop of Fulham, The Rt Revd Jonathan Baker
The Bishop of Bradford, The Rt Revd Toby Howarth

Core Consultant Members: The Revd Giles Goddard
The Revd Andrew Goddard
The Revd Dr Jason Roach
The Rt Revd Bill Musk, former Bishop of North Africa in the Anglican Church of Jerusalem and the Middle East, nominated by The Most Revd Josiah Idowu-Fearon, to represent the Anglican Communion.

8. Discussions are under way with one or two others to join this group. The full membership of the group will be announced when these discussions have been concluded.
9. Members of the Co-ordinating Group may join in the meetings and work of specific thematic working groups in order to ensure good liaison, and the members of the thematic groups will have access to the co-ordinating group for the same purpose.

Thematic Working Groups

10. The range of themes which a Teaching Document will need to cover can be distilled into a number of broad subject areas:

- social and biological sciences;
- biblical;
- theological/ecclesiological;
- patristic/historical;
- liturgical;
- legal;
- missiological.

11. In each area, the aim will be:

- To reflect a full range of views, including evidence from related disciplines
- To agree common ground
- To identify differences of view and agree, as far as possible, on what we disagree about.

12. The first four of these subject areas have particular importance for establishing foundations for this project. These will be tackled from the outset with the others being set up as the work progresses. Each of these work strands will take into account:

- Anthropological issues – relationships, marriage and sexuality in the light of our understanding of ‘being human’
- Ethical challenges – church teaching on contested matters regarding marriage and sexual relations
- Living with disagreement – relation to ecclesiology, unity in diversity and its limits.

Thematic working groups – role and structure

13. The thematic working groups will have access to the Co-ordinating Group as required and episcopal members of the Co-ordinating Group may join each Thematic Group in

order to ensure good liaison. The groups will be expected to consult very widely beyond their own membership, both within the church, including ecumenical and Anglican Communion partners, and to secure the widest possible advice from the wider community.

Chairs and staff support for the Thematic Working Groups

Social and Biological Sciences

Disciplines to be covered: sociology, anthropology, psychology, physiology, biology, genetics and medical issues.

Chair: The Bishop of Crediton, The Rt Revd Sarah Mullally

Staff support: The Revd Dr Malcolm Brown

Biblical

Disciplines to be covered: Old Testament studies, New Testament studies, hermeneutics, biblical ethics.

Chair: The Bishop of Sheffield, The Rt Revd Pete Wilcox

Staff support: The Revd Dr Isabelle Hamley

Theological

Disciplines to be covered: dogmatics, ethics.

Chair: The Bishop of Chichester, The Rt Revd Dr Martin Warner

Staff support: The Revd Dr Jeremy Worthen

Historical

Disciplines to be covered: church history, including Early Church, Middle Ages, Reformation, modernity; history and theology of mission.

Chair: The Bishop of Winchester, The Rt Revd Tim Dakin

Staff support: The Revd Dr Will Adam

Communication and Dissemination

14. The Teaching Document will be substantial and it will need to be backed up with discussion materials, study guides etc. This will require particular skills which may not be represented in the above groups.
15. At the discretion of the Coordinating Group, this might be handled by the creation of a Communications and Dissemination group to manage both the adaptation of the material for wide use and the inevitable Communications issues that will arise as the document comes to fruition.

Holding the Project Together

16. The management of a complex process involving all the groups working independently yet on a shared project will require many more hours of oversight and administrative support than the NCI staff can offer. A budget has therefore been secured to appoint a full time Project Manager (the job title is indicative of the role and may be revised).

++Justin Cantuar

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June 2017