

THE EPISCOPAL TEACHING DOCUMENT

Terms of Reference for Co-Ordinating Group and Thematic Working Groups

Approved by the House of Bishops May 2018

(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

Introduction

These Terms of Reference are intended to orientate those involved in shaping and contributing to the teaching document referred to in the Archbishops' letter. In a task of this complexity, it is to be expected that perspectives on the task, and the way to complete it, will shift as the work develops, and as more voices join the conversation. They are not set down to inhibit that process, but where they are perceived no longer to fit well with the way the work is developing, it will be important to register that and communicate as appropriate with others engaged in the common task, in particular the Chair of the Co-Ordinating Group.

Key parameters

Scope

The task of all involved in the work towards an episcopal teaching document on marriage and sexuality needs to be understood in relation to its envisaged scope. According to GS Misc 1158, this will be "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.

"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.”

Focus

In order to address this range of topics adequately, there will be a particular need for attention to the following four areas:

- anthropological issues, and their societal implications – including: relationships, community, companionship, friendship, singleness, gender, sexuality, sexual practices, celibacy, betrothal, procreation, cohabitation, marriage, family, children and their development, in the light of a well-developed, properly informed, understanding of ‘being human’ in society;
- ethical questions – including: church teaching on contested matters regarding gender, marriage, the family and sexual identity, relations and practice;
- ecclesiological dynamics – including: unity in diversity and its limits, ways of living with disagreement with integrity, relationships with other Churches, relationships with the State and society;
- missiological imperatives – including: living and communicating the gospel in contemporary society with authenticity and credibility, the Church’s relationship with culture and with different forms of culture in the UK and internationally, the work of God beyond the life of the Church.

Time line

It is hoped that the teaching document will be available for public discussion before the end of the current Quinquennium of the General Synod and the next Lambeth Conference, both falling in summer 2020.

In order for this to be possible, a full draft would need to be available to the House and the College of Bishops well before that date, so that bishops have the opportunity to shape the text to be released. That might mean, for instance in the present pattern of episcopal meetings, making an initial draft of at least some of the proposed text available to the meeting of the College of Bishops scheduled for September 2019, to be followed up by further discussion at the regular meeting of the House of Bishops in December of the same year.

That would in turn imply that the Thematic Working Groups should be sharing full preliminary drafts of their work with the Co-Ordinating Group in the first quarter of 2019, so that there is time for proper dialogue between all involved as the text is prepared for the meeting of the College in September.

The details of this complex process are however still to be fully worked out.

The Role of the Co-Ordinating Group (COG)

Purpose

The purpose of the Co-Ordinating Group (COG) is to oversee the production of the text of the teaching document to be put to the House of Bishops for discussion, revision and in due course endorsement and publication.

Key responsibilities

Fulfilling its purpose will require careful liaison with the House at each stage of the process, and COG, led by its episcopal members, will be responsible for ensuring regular and clear communication to the House.

Due to the breadth of scope of the teaching document, a number of episcopally led Thematic Working Groups (TWGs) have been formed to gather together the necessary range of expertise. COG will need to ensure that the work the TWGs are pursuing contributes towards the creation of a teaching document that has the appropriate level of rigour, range and coherence in content, and consistency in tone and approach, and that is suitable to be considered by the House of Bishops as a statement of the Church of England's teaching. Regular communication with the TWGs will therefore also be essential, as will promotion of appropriate communication between them as the work develops.

Preparation of the teaching document will need to include consultation as appropriate with a variety of partners, for instance other churches and other faiths, particular communities and theological constituencies. COG will be responsible for taking the lead in liaison with the Pastoral Advisory Group and others as needed in proposing how and when such consultation is to be conducted.

In consultation with the House of Bishops and with the thematic groups, COG will need to make decisions about the length, structure and format of the document, and other materials, that are to be presented to the House of Bishops. It will need to be attentive from an early stage to planning for publication and reception of the envisaged text, including communications strategy. Proposing an appropriate title would be part of this.

Approach

COG will draw on, and coordinate, the work of the TWGs. Material produced by the TWGs will feed into the work of COG as, making proper use of their findings, it shapes, drafts and refines the teaching document. This will require regular communication between COG and the TWGs, involving the members of all groups, with a particular role here for the chairs, especially at the drafting stage. Such communication will be facilitated by the Enabling Officer for the project. It will also involve some liaison with the Pastoral Advisory Group.

The Co-Ordinating Group will need:

- to work prayerfully, attending faithfully to holy scripture and acknowledging its authority, within the community, tradition and pastoral practice of the Church in the reality of the world using God's gifts of reason and wisdom shaped by the Spirit, in order to seek and discern the mind of Christ for the Church and the world;
- to draw together the best of thinking and insights, relevant to the issues covered by the teaching document, and respecting both the integrity of all the disciplines drawn upon and those views which, though serious, proved to be minority ones, as presented in the work of the TWGs, to analyse them with theological rigour, and to integrate them as far as possible into a single coherent teaching document;

- to co-ordinate the work of the TWGs, working closely with the episcopal leads, especially with regard to their wide consultation within the Church, including ecumenical and Anglican Communion partners, and beyond, and to listening to the lived experience of anyone about whom the Group writes and to assessing their experience with theological sensitivity;
- to have a sound understanding of current Church of England teaching relating to marriage and sexuality, as expressed in its historic formularies, its Canon Law and other authoritative texts, including those previously approved or commended by the House of Bishops, and of the current position in the Anglican Communion;
- to reflect carefully on principles of Anglican theological method and sources of authority;
- to relate closely to the House of Bishops;
- to ensure that the widest possible range of scholarly teaching and commentary is taken into account and listened to attentively, including from those beyond the Anglican and Protestant world, and outside the Global North.

Outputs

It is expected that in its reporting back to the House of Bishops, there are likely to be a number of potentially overlapping phases in COG's work, with correspondingly different kinds of output.

First, drawing directly on the work of the TWGs, COG will present a review of current scholarship in theology and other academic disciplines, noting key areas of consensus and of disagreement within that scholarship, and commenting on ways in which it may explain, enrich and challenge the current teaching of the Church of England.

Second, it will set out in general terms:

- What it proposes to the House as material which - while not expecting complete unanimity across the Church of England - the House should be able to receive, agree and promulgate as the teaching of the Church.
- What it proposes to the House as material which – while not formal teaching – comprises facts, analysis and reflection which the House can draw on with confidence to inform its teaching;
- What it proposes to the House as material – whether facts, analysis, reflection or existing or possible teaching material – which it recognises to be a matter of continuing serious disagreement among members of the Church of England.

Where there is such disagreement, some analysis of the focus and nature of the disagreement, the level of its seriousness, and its ecclesiological implications should be given. The taxonomy suggested by the Faith and Order Commission in its Report *Communion and Disagreement*¹ may be one helpful source here, i.e. disagreement that (a) does not threaten the communion of the Church (b) threatens ecclesial communion and (c) threatens apostolic communion.

Third, COG will present a draft version of the teaching document to the House of Bishops at an agreed point and will engage with the House and the College of Bishops in order to assist the House of Bishops in determining a version ready for publication and discussion.

¹https://www.churchofengland.org/media/2530546/communion_and_disagreement_faoc_report_gs_misc_1139.pdf

Membership

The episcopal members who bear responsibility for bringing a final text to the House for approval will be joined by a standing group of Core Consultant Members (clergy and laity). **See separate Appendix to the Terms of Reference.**

The Role of the Thematic Working Groups (TWGs)

Purpose

Due to the breadth of the task as set out in GS Misc 1158 and summarised in the Key parameters above, a number of different Thematic Working Groups (TWGs) will be needed to work under the oversight of COG on the preparation of the teaching document. Their central purpose will be to review current scholarship within theology and related academic fields with a bearing on the content of the teaching document (as set out in the Key parameters above), identifying key areas of consensus and of disagreement within that scholarship, and highlighting ways in which it may explain, enrich and challenge the current teaching of the Church of England.

Key responsibilities

- To work prayerfully, attending faithfully to holy scripture and acknowledging its authority, within the community, tradition and pastoral practice of the Church in the reality of the world using God's gifts of reason and wisdom shaped by the Spirit, in order to seek and discern the mind of Christ for the Church and the world.
- To draw together the best of thinking and insights, relevant to the issues covered by the teaching document, from respected thinking in their relevant disciplines and to analyse them with theological rigour.
- To produce material which may be fed into the work of COG and shared with other TWGs as and when this is available and required in a manageable and helpful format and size, indicating clearly where they have been unable to reach substantial consensus on matters relating to their central purpose as defined above.
- To understand current Church of England teaching relating to marriage and sexuality, as expressed in its historic formularies, its Canon Law and other authoritative texts, including those previously approved or commended by the House of Bishops.

Approach

Initially, four TWGs, each chaired by a bishop, will review current scholarship within specific fields, and each taking account of the four key areas for consideration identified in the Introduction above (anthropology, ethics, ecclesiology and missiology). These are:

1. Social and Biological Sciences
Disciplines to be covered should include: sociology, anthropology, psychology, physiology, biology, genetics and medical issues.
2. Biblical
Disciplines to be covered should include: Old Testament studies, New Testament studies, hermeneutics, biblical ethics.

3. Theological

Disciplines to be covered should include: dogmatics, ethics and moral theology, missiology, ecclesiology.

4. Historical

Disciplines to be covered should include: church history (from the early to the contemporary church), societal history and the development of its practices and institutions, the interaction between church and societal history; history and theology of mission.

Other fields may need to receive more detailed attention in due course, such as liturgy and legal issues, and some areas already being addressed may be selected for further study, such as missiology. Additional TWGs may be set up to address these needs.

The TWGs will engage with COG as required and, after due consultation with the episcopal leads of the TWGs, members of COG may join each TWG in order to help promote good liaison. The Enabling Officer will play a key part both in relating the TWGs to each other and to COG.

Membership

Each TWG will be episcopally chaired and supported by a member of staff, as well as the Enabling Officer for this project. The further members of each group will combine the required knowledge and expertise with the necessary range of views and other representative characteristics to carry out the work of the group, and will be agreed with the Chair of the Co-Ordinating Group. Named consultants may be similarly appointed to assist the chair, members and staff in their task, and wider consultation with people and bodies who can bring knowledge, wisdom and experience to bear on the work is encouraged.

Appointments are continuing to be made to some of the TWGs. Their latest membership is listed in **in the separate Appendix to the Terms of Reference**.