

Sexuality and The Church: A First Look. Wednesday 1st February. St Mary's Church Ely.

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<https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/general-synod/bishops/pastoral-principles>

Recognising where we are in history...How has society changed in your lifetime? What has shaped our perspectives?

One of the pastoral principles is about acknowledging prejudice. We have all been formed by a variety of people, media outlets, churches, areas of society. We will all carry some prejudice, fear, hypocrisy. As we enter conversations around sexuality and the church, we do well to reflect on our own starting points.

Not long ago and still true in many countries...homosexuality criminalised, impossible for women to survive outside of marriage except in specific circumstances, translation issues, language is changing, acknowledge there is a lot to get our heads around and much we do not know. This goes both ways – yes some are more progressive but also misogyny (e.g. Tate brothers) and violence against the LGBTQIA+ community well documented. In our culture, issues of identity and sexuality are not clear. It is not a surprise that they are not clear cut in the church. **All the skills we have been learning as a church of curiosity, noticing, asking questions are going to be really important here.** “Solving” this as a church – whether locally or nationally – is not the answer to the questions society is asking about identity, gender, sexuality. The answer to those questions is the love of Christ.

Slide 8 gives a quote from *Listening with Love and Faith*. The young people described a **person's relationship with Jesus as 'the most defining feature of our identity as Christians'**.

“When invited to write an open letter to the church in response to their learning, one young person wrote, ‘please be welcoming and gentle to our new congregation and be respectful to anyone who has their own life path. Pray for their relationship with God and don't judge anyone by their gender / sexuality [...] the most important thing in our lives is the relationships we and those around us have with God. Help us have humility, gentleness when it comes to other relationships that aren't our own” from *Listening with Love and Faith*.

https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/P1156%20COE%20Living%20in%20Love%20%26%20Faith%20Findings%20Report_V8%20DPS.pdf

That said...we are having this conversation within the Church of England and have been over many years.

Slide 9 briefly covers what synod is and who is part of it. The Church of England is “led by bishops in synod” according to ++Justin (more traditionally described as “episcopally led and synodically governed”). Synod has three houses, and synods exist at diocesan and deanery level. They are the place of debate, of change, of accountability. Some changes can be made by bishops without synod, most must be affirmed/welcomed/commended by synod.

More here: <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/about-general-synod#na>

2013 – Marriage Act passed to allow same-sex marriage in England but did not change ecclesial law regarding 'Holy Matrimony'. Created legal distance between civil marriage and holy matrimony.

[https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/relationships/overview/lawofmarriage-/#:~:text=Marriage%20\(Same%20Sex%20Couples\)%20Act%202013&text=The%20legislation%20allo wed%20religious%20organisations,to%20marry%20same%2Dsex%20couples.](https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/relationships/overview/lawofmarriage-/#:~:text=Marriage%20(Same%20Sex%20Couples)%20Act%202013&text=The%20legislation%20allo wed%20religious%20organisations,to%20marry%20same%2Dsex%20couples.)

2013 – Pilling report (chaired by Sir Joseph Pilling). First piece of work commissioned by the House of Bishops on issues of sexuality (commissioned in Jan 2012). Looked at our context with regards what the church calls “human sexuality” and included meeting with lay and ordained lesbian and gay colleagues. Made 18 recommendations, did not propose change in teaching on sexual conduct but did propose that with PCC approval churches should be able to offer “appropriate services to mark a same sex relationship”. That did not happen. Bishops accepted the recommended for further carefully constructed conversations but clarified that both liturgical and pastoral practice remained unchained during that process. Revd Dr Jessica Martin one of the consultants on this work.

Report: https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2018-01/GS%201929%20Working%20Group%20on%20human%20sexuality_0.pdf

Press release: <https://www.churchofengland.org/news-and-media/news-and-statements/pilling-report-published>

The Pilling report led to...

From 2014 - “Shared conversations”: Given the significant changes in our culture in relation to human sexuality, how should the Church respond? Outcome recommended “maximum freedom” without changing the doctrine of marriage itself...Called for welcome and support for LGBTQIA+ community. Called for change to guidance regarding candidates for ordination. Acknowledged as the middle of a process. A “take note” debate in synod, so neutral motion.

<https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/general-synod/bishops/shared-conversations-archive>

From 2017, “Living in Love and Faith (LLF)” is commissioned by House of Bishops. Shifts towards the idea of creating a **learning document for the whole church**. It involved a series of working groups around different areas with experts in each from a range of perspectives (coordinating group; biblical studies group; Theology; History; Social and Biological Sciences). It also included further shared conversations with a range of people, some of whom then made films about their experience.

The Pastoral Principles (slide 5) guided this work, and a course was produced for churches or groups to work through the principles.

<https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/living-love-and-faith>

In the meantime...

July 2017 General Synod passed a motion calling conversion therapy unethical. This became state law in 2021: <https://www.churchofengland.org/media-and-news/news-releases/conversion-therapy-ban-comment-bishop-london.>

In 2018 – in response to a motion carried by general synod – it was confirmed that a service of acceptance of baptismal faith or baptism itself would be appropriate to mark gender transition.

<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/Pastoral%20Guidance-Affirmation-Baptismal-Faith.pdf>

In all the above reports, the church has affirmed and welcomed those within the LGBT community and celebrated their ministry.

SO: presenting issues become ordination of those in same-sex relationships and whether the church can/should bless same-sex marriage.

In 2020: Course, videos, and podcasts: a book and a series of films were published along with a course all as part of LLF. Feedback from those who participated in the course was collected via questionnaires and a piece of qualitative research commissioned. The LLF course was offered in Ely as a deanery wide course. All available via the LLF Learning Hub:

<https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/living-love-and-faith/living-love-and-faith-learning-hub>.

A detour to the Lambeth Conference 2022. The Lambeth Conference is a meeting of bishops from across the Anglican Communion. They have study and conversation around a number of “calls”, one of which was around Human Dignity and Sexuality. Slide 16 is a quote from Archbishop Justin Welby. This was a significant statement from the Archbishop of Canterbury.

2022-3: The outcome to Living in Love and Faith. The House of Bishops published analysis and evaluation of questionnaires (called ‘technical report’), a book about friendship (*Friendship and the Body of Christ*), and an overview of responses to the LLF course (*Listening with Love and Faith*).

[Things to notice at this point...for some, this has been ten years waiting for what was originally offered by Pilling report to be affirmed by bishops. Also notice ++Justin saying everyone here is Christian, a commitment not to write each other off is part of Anglican unity. Notice how far the church has moved in other ways – e.g. Women Bishops failed at General Synod in 2012 (House of Laity only, in which it was 6 votes short), then passed in all houses 2014.]

The College of Bishops Winter 2022-2023 House of Bishops final response published on Friday 20th January following a series of multi-day meetings attended by all bishops. During those meetings the bishops processed all the output from LLF, as well as returning to their own studies of scripture and doctrine. The Archbishops held a press conference which is available online and written documents which are attached.

++Justin has said he will not use the prayers as a way to keep Anglican communion together. We assume this is to ensure bishops from other provinces are able to receive communion which ++Justin has consecrated in good conscience.

What happens now?

- Synod debate Tuesday 7th and Wednesday 8th February - pray for them! Synod being asked to lament and repent, to welcome Bishop’s response and prayers, to commit to holding Bishops’ to account to re-visit in five years. There will no doubt be amendments, a wide-ranging debate, and a number of votes.
- The prayers will be introduced by the House of Bishops. It will be at the minister’s discretion to use the prayers or not.
- The bishops are asking synod to hold them to account and will review in five years.

In the background (and often the foreground!)

Groups representing particular theologies or perspectives within the church have been campaigning, writing their own reports and books, producing videos, and suggesting ways forward.

Each diocese has engaged in the conversation differently. E.g. in Oxford diocese (where I trained) the debate tended to happen in public by way of letter writing between the Bishop and groups of clergy. In recent months, Bishop Stephen Croft (Oxford) and Rev Vaughan Roberts (vicar of a large conservative church) have coordinated publication of their opposing views. In other dioceses, conversation has taken place more privately and/or within the LLF courses.

We must remember that whenever we talk about these issues and particularly when we do so in public, we are talking about real people and relationships. It is those in the LGBTQI+ community who carry much of the emotional load and pain of these conversations.

Beginning to take a closer look...

What have the bishops actually said and done?

This is summarised in the slides and available here:

Why is it so messy?

A number of issues are raised on this deliberately messy slide! The point I hoped to make was that there are lots of perspectives, some of which we might be surprised by – e.g. our relationship to the Roman Catholic church – and it is likely that within St Mary's different things will be important to each of us. Some may be written on this slide, some might not be. The point is that this is messy and even those we agree with might hold their perspectives for different reasons than we do.

Slide 26: A prayer from the letter written by Bishop Stephen (Ely). and Bishop Dagmar (Huntingdon).