

## **House of Bishops Pastoral Guidance on Same Sex Marriage**

### **To the Clergy and People of the Church of England**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ

We write as fellow disciples of Jesus Christ who are called to love one another as Christ has loved us. Our vocation as disciples of Christ in God's world is to hold out the offer of life in all its fullness. God delights always to give good gifts to his children.

The gospel of the love of God made known to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the greatest of these gifts. The call of the gospel demands that we all listen, speak and act with integrity, self discipline and grace, acknowledging that as yet our knowledge and understanding are partial.

As members of the Body of Christ we are aware that there will be a range of responses across the Church of England to the introduction of same sex marriage. As bishops we have reflected and prayed together about these developments. As our statement of 27th January indicated, we are not all in agreement about every aspect of the Church's response. However we are all in agreement that the Christian understanding and doctrine of marriage as a lifelong union between one man and one woman remains unchanged.

We are conscious that within both Church and society there are men and women seeking to live faithfully in covenanted same sex relationships. As we said in our response to the consultation prior to the same sex marriage legislation, "the proposition that same sex relationships can embody crucial social virtues is not in dispute. Same sex relationships often embody genuine mutuality and fidelity...., two of the virtues which the Book of Common Prayer uses to commend marriage. The Church of England seeks to see those virtues maximised in society".

We have already committed ourselves to a process of facilitated conversations across the whole Church of England in the light of the Pilling Report. These conversations will involve ecumenical and interfaith partners and particularly the wider Anglican Communion to whom we rejoice to be bound by our inheritance of faith and mutual affection. They will include profound reflection on the meaning, interpretation and application of scripture to which we all seek to be faithful. They will involve particular attention to the lived experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people. We believe that Christian understandings of sexuality have a vital contribution to make in our society's conversation about human flourishing.

The introduction of same sex marriage in our country is a new reality and has consequences for the life and discipline of the Church of England. We seek to model a distinctive and generous witness to Jesus Christ in our pastoral guidance to the Church at this time which is set out in the Appendix to this letter.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is good news for all people in all times and situations. We continue to seek God's grace and the prayers of the whole Church as we seek to proclaim that faith afresh in this generation.

+ Justin Cantuar

+ Sentamu Eboracensis

On behalf of the House of Bishops of the Church of England

## Appendix:

### The Church of England and the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013

#### The Church of England's teaching on marriage

1. The Church of England's long standing teaching and rule are set out in Canon B30: ***'The Church of England affirms, according to our Lord's teaching, that marriage is in its nature a union permanent and lifelong, for better for worse, till death them do part, of one man with one woman, to the exclusion of all others on either side, for the procreation and nurture of children, for the hallowing and right direction of the natural instincts and affections, and for the mutual society, help and comfort which the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity.'***
2. The Book of Common Prayer introduces the Solemnisation of Matrimony by saying, ***'Dearly Beloved, we are gathered here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation to join together this Man and this Woman in holy Matrimony; which is an honourable estate, instituted of God in the time of man's innocency, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church; which holy estate Christ adorned and beautified with his presence, and first miracle that he wrought, in Cana of Galilee...'***
3. The Common Worship marriage service, consistently with the Book of Common Prayer, says, ***'The Bible teaches us that marriage is a gift of God in creation and a means to grace, a holy mystery in which man and woman become one flesh...'*** The House of Bishops teaching document of 1999 noted that: ***"Marriage is a pattern that God has given in creation, deeply rooted in our social instincts, through which a man and a woman may learn love together over the course of their lives."***
4. The Lambeth Conference of 1998 said ***'in view of the teaching of Scripture, upholds faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union, and believes that abstinence is right for those who are not called to marriage'*** (resolution 1.10) This remains the declared position of the Anglican Communion.
5. The same resolution went on to acknowledge ***'that there are among us persons who experience themselves as having a homosexual orientation. Many of these are members of the Church and are seeking the pastoral care, moral direction of the Church, and God's transforming power for the living of their lives and the ordering of relationships. We commit ourselves to listen to the experience of homosexual persons and we wish to assure them that they are loved by God and that all baptised, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are full members of the Body of Christ.'*** It went on to 'condemn irrational fear of homosexuals, violence within marriage and any trivialisation and commercialisation of sex.'
6. In February 2005 the Dromantine Communique from the Primates of the Anglican Communion again affirmed the Anglican Communion's opposition to any form of behaviour which 'diminished' homosexual people.
7. It stated: ***'We .... wish to make it quite clear that in our discussion and assessment of the moral appropriateness of specific human behaviours, we continue unreservedly to be committed to the pastoral support and care of homosexual people. The victimisation or diminishment of human beings whose affections happen to be ordered towards people of the same sex is anathema to us. We assure homosexual people that they are children of***

***God, loved and valued by him, and deserving of the best we can give of pastoral care and friendship.'***

8. It was on the basis of this teaching that the then Archbishops published in June 2012 the official Church of England submission in response to the Government's intention to introduce same-sex marriage. Their arguments in it were based on the Church of England's understanding of marriage, a set of beliefs and practices that it believes most benefits society. During the legislation's passage through Parliament, no Lord Spiritual voted for the legislation.

### **The effect of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013**

9. The Government's legislation, nevertheless, secured large majorities in both Houses of Parliament on free votes and the first same sex marriages in England are expected to take place in March. From then there will, for the first time, be a divergence between the general understanding and definition of marriage in England as enshrined in law and the doctrine of marriage held by the Church of England and reflected in the Canons and the Book of Common Prayer.

10. The effect of the legislation is that in most respects there will no longer be any distinction between marriage involving same sex couples and couples of opposite genders. The legislation makes religious as well as civil same sex weddings possible, though only where the relevant denomination or faith has opted in to conducting such weddings. In addition, the legislation provides that no person may be compelled to conduct or be present at such a wedding.

11. The Act provides no opt in mechanism for the Church of England because of the constitutional convention that the power of initiative on legislation affecting the Church of England rests with the General Synod, which has the power to pass Measures and Canons. The Act preserves, as part of the law of England, the effect of any Canon which makes provision about marriage being the union of one man with one woman, notwithstanding the general, gender free definition of marriage. As a result Canon B30 remains part of the law of the land.

12. When the Act comes into force in March **it will continue not to be legally possible for two persons of the same sex to marry according to the rites of the Church of England.** In addition the Act makes clear that **any rights and duties which currently exist in relation to being married in church of England churches do not extend to same sex couples.**

13. The legislation has not made any changes to the nature of civil partnerships though it paves the way for a procedure by which couples in civil partnerships can, if they choose, convert them into a marriage. The Government has indicated that it will be later this year before the necessary regulations can be made and the first conversions of civil partnerships into marriages become possible.

14. There are three particular areas on which some guidance is necessary on the implications of the new legislation in relation to our common life and ministry in England.

### **Access to the sacraments and pastoral care for people in same sex marriages**

15. In *Issues in Human Sexuality* the House affirmed that, while the same standards of conduct applied to all, the Church of England should not exclude from its fellowship those lay people of gay or lesbian orientation who, in conscience, were unable to accept that a life of sexual abstinence was required of them and who, instead, chose to enter into a faithful, committed sexually active relationship.

16. Consistent with that, we said in our 2005 pastoral statement that lay people who had registered civil partnerships ought not to be asked to give assurances about the nature of their relationship before being admitted to baptism, confirmation and holy communion, or being welcomed into the life of the local worshipping community more generally.

17. We also noted that the clergy could not lawfully refuse to baptize children on account of the family structure or lifestyle of those caring for them, so long as they and the godparents were willing to make the requisite baptismal promises following a period of instruction.

18. We recognise the many reasons why couples wish their relationships to have a formal status. These include the joys of exclusive commitment and also extend to the importance of legal recognition of the relationship. To that end, civil partnership continues to be available for same sex couples. Those same sex couples who choose to marry should be welcomed into the life of the worshipping community and not be subjected to questioning about their lifestyle. Neither they nor any children they care for should be denied access to the sacraments.

### **Acts of worship following civil same sex weddings**

19. As noted above, same sex weddings in church will not be possible. As with civil partnership, some same sex couples are, however, likely to seek some recognition of their new situation in the context of an act of worship.

20. The 2005 pastoral statement said that it would not be right to produce an authorized public liturgy in connection with the registering of civil partnerships and that clergy should not provide services of blessing for those who registered civil partnerships. The House did not wish, however, to interfere with the clergy's pastoral discretion about when more informal kind of prayer, at the request of the couple, might be appropriate in the light of the circumstances. The College made clear on 27 January that, just as the Church of England's doctrine of marriage remains the same, so its pastoral and liturgical practice also remains unchanged.

21. The same approach as commended in the 2005 statement should therefore apply to couples who enter same-sex marriage, on the assumption that any prayer will be accompanied by pastoral discussion of the church's teaching and their reasons for departing from it. Services of blessing should not be provided. Clergy should respond pastorally and sensitively in other ways.

### **Clergy and ordinands**

22. The preface to the Declaration of Assent, which all clergy have to make when ordained and reaffirm when they take up a new appointment, notes that the Church of England '**professes the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation.**' This tension between the givenness of the faith and the challenge to proclaim it afresh in each generation, as the Spirit continues to lead the Church into all truth, stands at the heart of current debates about human sexuality and of what constitutes leading a life that is according to the way of Christ.

23. At ordination clergy make a declaration that they will endeavour to fashion their own life and that of their household '**according to the way of Christ**' that they may be '**a pattern and example to Christ's people**'. A requirement as to the manner of life of the clergy is also directly imposed on the clergy by Canon C 26, which says that '**at all times he shall be diligent to frame and fashion his life and that of his family according to the doctrine of Christ, and to make himself and them, as much as in him lies, wholesome examples and patterns to the flock of Christ.**'

24. The implications of this particular responsibility of clergy to teach and exemplify in their life the teachings of the Church have been explained as follows; ***'The Church is also bound to take care that the ideal is not misrepresented or obscured; and to this end the example of its ordained ministers is of crucial significance. This means that certain possibilities are not open to the clergy by comparison with the laity, something that in principle has always been accepted'*** (Issues in Human Sexuality, 1991, Section 5.13).

25. The Church of England will continue to place a high value on theological exploration and debate that is conducted with integrity. That is why Church of England clergy are able to argue for a change in its teaching on marriage and human sexuality, while at the same time being required to fashion their lives consistently with that teaching.

26. Getting married to someone of the same sex would, however, clearly be at variance with the teaching of the Church of England. The declarations made by clergy and the canonical requirements as to their manner of life do have real significance and need to be honoured as a matter of integrity.

**27. The House is not, therefore, willing for those who are in a same sex marriage to be ordained to any of the three orders of ministry. In addition it considers that it would not be appropriate conduct for someone in holy orders to enter into a same sex marriage, given the need for clergy to model the Church's teaching in their lives.**

28. The Church of England has a long tradition of tolerating conscientious dissent and of seeking to avoid drawing lines too firmly, not least when an issue is one where the people of God are seeking to discern the mind of Christ in a fast changing context. Nevertheless at ordination clergy undertake to ***'accept and minister the discipline of this Church, and respect authority duly exercised within it.'*** We urge all clergy to act consistently with that undertaking.

House of Bishops

15 February 2014