

III Affirming non-marital sexual relationships theologically and liturgically

472. In addition to the difficulties already discussed, I believe that while the Church must welcome all and acknowledge the good that exists in all relationships, it cannot commend and affirm non-marital sexual relationships in its teaching or practice. This is the teaching summarized in resolution I.10 of the Lambeth Conference 1998 to which the terms of reference refer, and to which the Working Group is asked to give attention. I have come to the conclusion with great regret that the Report if adopted will undermine this teaching both in its theological argument and in its proposals for the recognition of permanent same sex relationships.

473. The Report undermines Lambeth I.10 theologically when it declares in Paragraph 312 that:

In the face of conflicting scholarship, as well as conflicting beliefs, we believe that the Church should be cautious about attempting to pronounce definitively on the implications of Scripture for homosexual people. We do agree that, as all Christians are called to faithfulness, exclusivity and life-long commitment in their sexual relationships, same sex relationships which do not seek to embody those aspects of vocation cannot be right. We learn from what previous generations of the faithful have understood the Holy Spirit to be saying to the Churches, wait for the Spirit's guidance in our own generation and commit ourselves to finding ways for the Church to continue to listen for his voice.

474. This does not show why the previous statements from the Church of England and the wider Anglican Communion (summarized in I.10) have been wrong to teach as they have in relation to homosexual behaviour. These statements have been clear that what is wrong with same sex activity is precisely the fact that it is same sex activity, regardless of whether or not it takes place in the context of 'faithfulness, exclusivity and life-long commitment'. In saying this, these statements have followed the teaching of Scripture which scholars are overwhelmingly agreed is always negative about sexual behaviour between people of the same sex and says nothing at all about whether such relationships should be faithful, committed or exclusive.

475. On the recognition of same sex relationships, Lambeth I.10 said that the Conference ‘cannot advise the legitimising or blessing of same sex unions’. But the Report in Recommendation 16 says that priests should, with the agreement of their PCC, ‘be free to recognize a permanent same sex relationship in a public service’. I understand very well the desire for pastoral accommodation but I cannot see how this can be the right way forward for at least six reasons.

476. First, the Church cannot hold a public service for a couple simply on the basis that it discerns virtues and good qualities in their relationship. It must also be confident that the pattern of relationship it is affirming is in accordance with God’s will. It expresses that confidence liturgically by proclaiming a form of life which is in accordance with God’s will and asking the couple to affirm publicly that they seek to live faithfully within this way of life. This means that as long as the Church of England continues to ‘abide by its current teaching’ it cannot with integrity offer or formally allow a service for any pattern of sexual relationship other than marriage, even though Christians can recognize moral goods, such as love and fidelity, in particular non-marital sexual relationships and qualities of character in the partners. Good, compassionate pastoral care requires the Church to help people to respond obediently to God’s love by living rightly before him and thus it cannot be pastoral to affirm a form of relationship which is contrary to God’s will.

477. Secondly, Paragraphs 372–399, and Recommendation 16 which follows from them, are ambiguous about the commitments and disciplines of holiness in relation to sexual life, in particular whether the proposed services would be open to those in a sexually active relationship or only to those whose relationship is a celibate one. This means that the recommendation does not fit with either the Church’s teaching, which the Report says it abides by, or with the demands for sexual exclusivity (with which not all gay couples would agree) set out in Paragraph 312. The recommendation also does not recognize that such a service will not meet the stated needs of many same sex couples who reject the Church’s teaching. They want the whole of their relationship (including its sexual aspect) to be affirmed by the Church and, increasingly, wish their relationship to be affirmed as a form of marriage. Ambiguity will not be enough and there will thus be continuing pressure for the full acceptance of their understanding of their relationship by the Church.

478. Thirdly, Paragraphs 369–399 talk about the recognition not only of civil partnerships but also of same sex marriages. If the Church did celebrate in a public service the fact that two people had just entered into a same sex marriage this would be incompatible with its doctrine of marriage (which says that a marriage can only be between a man and a woman) and would inevitably be understood in both the Church (nationally and globally) and wider society as the Church of England affirming same sex marriages even if refusing to solemnize them in church.

479. Fourthly, by proposing that priests should, with the agreement of their PCC, ‘be free to recognize a permanent same sex relationship in a public service’ the Report undermines a bishop’s authority within his own diocese, bypasses the need for formal authorization and opens the possibility for a range of services to be offered. The Primates of the Communion in 2003 stated: ‘The Archbishop of Canterbury spoke for us all when he said that it is through liturgy that we express what we believe, and that there is no theological consensus about same sex unions’. The Report, in contrast, acknowledges the lack of consensus but then proceeds to suggest the development of new liturgies at a parish level in a manner which risks producing liturgical anarchy in this controversial area and pressure being put on individual bishops and priests to permit and offer such public services.

480. Fifthly, liturgical ambiguity and authorized diversity will lead to the cultural captivity of the Church, inhibiting her ability to proclaim the biblical and Christian teaching about sexual ethics and the power of Jesus Christ to liberate people from all sin, including sexual sin. The Church will lack credibility in declaring that sexual activity is given exclusively for heterosexual marriage, or in declaring that people can and should refrain from same sex sexual activity, once it is holding authorized services that affirm sexually active gay and lesbian relationships. Pressure is also likely to grow for liturgical recognition of non-marital heterosexual relationships.

481. Sixthly we need to be clear that, even if what is proposed are not called blessings, that is what they will in fact be. They will be occasions when God’s blessing is invoked upon a same sex relationship. The theological reasons why we should not bless sexually active same sex relationships in this way are highlighted in the following quotation from the Canadian theologian Edith Humphrey who asks what such blessing would mean:

It would be to declare that these so-called ‘unions’ are in themselves pictures or icons of God’s love, to say that they display the salvation story, to rejoice that that they are glorified or taken up into God’s own actions and being. It would be to declare that they have a significant and fruitful part in creation, and that they are symbols of the in-breaking and coming rule of God, in which the Church now shares and in which we will eventually participate fully. It would be to ‘speak a good word’ about this sort of relationship, explicitly declaring it to be a condition in which the way of the cross and the way of new life come together. Precisely here, the Church would be saying, you can see the love of God in human form, and the glory of humanity. It would be to name God as the one who blesses an act for which in fact repentance is required. So we would replace God with an idol, and so we would rend the Church.¹⁴⁹

482. Earlier, in Paragraph 435, I quoted two Christian friends who experience same sex attraction. Their words, along with those that follow from a third Christian friend, offer a final reason why I cannot, as a pastor, support this recommendation:

‘I would feel hugely undermined and discouraged if the Church of England was to affirm the kind of gay relationship which I believe the Bible teaches is sinful and should be resisted. Christians like me who experience same sex attraction need our Church to encourage us to stand firm against the pressures of the world, rather than providing an example of accommodation. I already feel isolated in the world, holding the position I take, and I fear that any change in the Church’s teaching would make me increasingly lonely in the Church as well.’

Unity, Listening and continuing discernment

483. The Report’s proposal for facilitated discussions about sexuality (Paragraphs 55–83, 352–368 and Recommendation 2) is one with which it is hard to disagree. Who can object to further conversation? However, there are two problems with the current basis on which it is proposed it should be conducted. First, as I have already indicated, the proposal for facilitated discussions rests on a false premise, namely that we cannot currently be sure what the Church should believe, teach and practise in the area of human sexuality. Secondly, and stemming from this, to attempt such a discussion shaped by this Report’s proposals and