

Andrew Goddard, Presentation to House of Bishops' Working Group on Human Sexuality

In my presentation I want to map how I see the challenges facing CofE discussions on sexuality. I do so as someone whose own position – which I'm happy to explain further – is that the traditional teaching of the church as expressed in the 1987 General Synod motion and Lambeth I.10 is biblically based and theologically coherent and needs to be reaffirmed and applied rather than revised or abandoned.

My involvement in CofE and Communion discussions has taken various forms in the last 15-20 years. In ordination training my personal tutor was Michael Vasey who shared with me a pre-publication copy of his *Strangers and Friends* and my doctoral supervisor, Oliver O'Donovan, was a key contributor to the [St Andrew's Day's Statement](#). In my curacy, after offering a critique of diocesan resources for studying *Issues*, I became part of a BSR group which discussed the subject and organised meetings across the diocese as reported in the Appendix to *Some Issues*. In 2002 and 2003, while teaching ethics at Wycliffe Hall, I was a main author of [True Union in the Body?](#), presented to the 2003 Primates' Meeting and also involved in the controversy surrounding Jeffrey John's appointment as Bishop of Reading.

I've been part of various conversations and in 2006-8 Giles Goddard and I wrote [open letters](#) in dialogue on the issue and I was also part of a group convened by Phil Groves which launched [Don't Throw Stones](#). In 2008 I helped Phil Groves in the final production of *Anglican Communion and Homosexuality*. I was also involved in discussions which led to the launch of [Continuing Indaba](#) which I've been privileged to observe over the last two years as part of an independent ecumenical observation group.

It is clear the church has contained a range of views on this subject for forty years. That was evident in the Gloucester Report being supplemented by the BSR Critical Reflections in the 1970s, the contrasting positions of the 1987 General Synod motion and the [Osborne report](#) in the late 1980s, the attempt to set out and implement an agreed compromise position during the 1990s based on *Issues*, the desire to uphold Lambeth I.10 despite many bishops having distanced themselves from it, the Reading crisis in 2003, and the General Synod's unwillingness in February 2007 to describe the 2005 Bishops' statement on Civil Partnerships as "as a balanced and sensitive attempt faithfully to apply the Church's teaching to civil partnerships".

Broadly the official response to this diverse reality has had five features. First, to uphold and restate traditional Christian teaching about sexual activity outside marriage in formal statements but secondly in practice to offer little public episcopal teaching in support of this and little constructive or positive pastoral guidance in relation to what this means for the church's response to those who identify as gay or lesbian. Third, in practice there have been various attempts at compromise or

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accommodation with those who take a different view – distinctions between clergy and laity, allowing clergy (but not bishops) to be in civil partnerships as long as they are not sexual, tolerating celebration of same-sex unions as long as they are not formal blessings or weddings. Alongside this there has, fourth, been an appeal to ongoing listening although little has been done centrally or in many dioceses to implement this. This has, at times, given the impression the CofE does not know what it thinks on the subject. Finally, the manner of implementing these accommodations varies considerably leading to accusations of a lack of integrity and coherence. I believe this combination of five elements is increasingly untenable.

Three longstanding features of the CofE and seven features of recent and current debates on sexuality have shaped this response and, unless addressed, could exacerbate tensions. I will just mention the first three and explore the others more fully. The Church of England has been marked by being a church committed to the supreme authority of Scripture, being a national and legally established church which seeks to be connected to the population as a whole and not just to regular worshippers, and being comprehensive or broad in terms of theological and ecclesial traditions. These three features play I think a significant part in the increasingly untenable approach just outlined. The problem is partly many see them pulling in different directions but also pressure has increased from the seven other features.

First, there is no agreed process by which the church can address and make decisions in this area.

Even when we know the processes – as with women bishops or the adoption of the covenant – they are not without their difficulties. But here we lack agreed procedures and in my limited experience there is a lack of coherent or strategic thinking within and between the national institutions about how to engage this issue. The result is the church's leadership is constantly reacting and responding to "facts on the ground" rather than being pro-active. No structure has been established to inform, educate and engage the church in this area or to develop a means to discern the mind of the church. It is not clear *how* the church may *either* change its current teaching or practice *or* become more coherent and consistent in upholding it. It would, I think, be of great help, to have some sort of agreed roadmap . This could set out the roles of key bodies (notably the House of Bishops and General Synod), the key fundamental principles which would need to be upheld (eg compatibility with Scripture, the status in the CofE of the mind of the wider Communion) and the agreed boundaries (eg in terms of the legitimate breadth of pastoral response and the conduct of clergy) which would be upheld during that process.

Second, the House of Bishops has not, I believe, given a lead or taken ownership in this area.

Announcing this review the Bishop of Norwich noted "Contrary to popular perception the House of

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Bishops has spent very little time over recent years discussing homosexuality". Unless the House of Bishops can better discuss and model discussing this subject the wider church is going to struggle. Everyone knows it contains a range of views but it appears it cannot publicly – or perhaps even privately – face these differences and work through them and their implications constructively. Many bishops, even if they hold to existing teaching, seem unwilling to teach and apply it, thus creating a vacuum in the face of major social change. Those bishops seeking change sometimes undermine existing teaching by failing to implement it or publicly criticising it. As a result accusations of hypocrisy and double standards gain weight and exacerbate the situation. Only by both engaging their own differences more honestly and upholding current teaching more clearly in word and deed can the bishops help the church move forward. Part of that will mean at some point thinking the unthinkable about what happens if or when it transpires there are irreconcilable views on what the church should teach and do.

Third, there has not been a clear focus, rationale and structure for genuine mutual listening and this needs to be addressed. This will obviously need to include listening to the variety of experience found among gay and lesbian Christians redressing the imbalance where those pressing for change currently tend to be heard more often. It must also face the fact that listening to experience cannot resolve our questions. In the words of Oliver O'Donovan, "There is, of course, no one single experience. Even within the compass of a single person's life, the experience of emotion and of sexuality is very varied; and when the experiences of different people are put in play, they often challenge and contest one another. The only possible outcome, then, of a discourse founded wholly on experience is unresolved conflict". Listening has to be not only to experience but also and primarily to Scripture and the wisdom of the wider church – historically and internationally.

There also needs to be some sense of the goals of listening. Is it simply listening in order to enable people to express different views, keep talking and maintain relationship while decisions are made and actions are taken elsewhere? Or is listening related to a process of education and discernment connected to making decisions? Can listening be constructed to enable us if not to reach agreement at least to reach consensus on non-agreement – understanding each other better by knowing where and why we differ as Christians and so clarifying issues and options for the church? If – as I think it must – a listening process aims at going beyond talking then the question is how we can best discern the mind of Christ together and the nature and consequences of our disagreements over this. Can we learn from the Church of Ireland consultation or the Continuing Indaba project or the Church of Scotland's survey of church elders? Can we bring together key protagonists for concentrated discussion as has happened at times but never been developed? Can we learn from secular models

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such as the National Consensus Process on Sexual Health and Responsible Sexual Behaviour in the US?

Fourth, the issue has divided the Anglican Communion. The rejection of Lambeth I.10 by North American Anglicans has set in play destructive forces and made Anglicans in England aware of how damaging this issue can be. I note on the handout some reasons why I think we have not faced here as pressing problems for the church's peace, unity, integrity and faithful witness as in the US. But we cannot pretend these are not real dangers. The Communion context also means the Church of England must act aware of its Communion relationships and in dialogue with non-English Anglicans. It faces three possible paths: keep within Communion moratoria and teaching *or* choose to disregard them *or* initiate dialogue and processes to change them within the Communion before proceeding here in the CofE.

Fifth, we have seen rapid social change since *Issues* in 1991. Saying what was said then is heard quite differently now – in church and society. That is not to say we need to change the substance of what we say but we need to work out much more clearly and carefully how to say it and how to live it given legal, cultural and attitudinal changes. We also need to recognise new challenges. To give just two examples. *Issues* dealt with bisexuality poorly in a single paragraph but the evidence about the spectrum of sexual attractions, the realities of sexual identities (more women identifying as bisexual than lesbian), and the growth in sexual exploration and experimentation particularly among the young makes this a pressing challenge. Here we need more work on the science of sexuality than the CofE has done since Gloucester. Secondly, the question is now increasingly one relating to “equal marriage” rather than a more positive attitude to some other form of same-sex union. Here we need more work on the theology of marriage. There is for example no point moving to a more affirming stance in relation to civil partnerships if actually what is ultimately sought is a new pattern of Christian marriage. We need to face the reality that our culture and hence our missional and pastoral context is now quite different. If we are to maintain traditional teaching here we need as the national, established church to be willing to be consciously counter-cultural.

Sixth, the CofE has become more obviously and strongly divided, even polarised, in a number of ways but with this issue increasingly the focus. Some conservatives have reacted to cultural change with a policy of entrenchment and campaigning and Anglican fractures elsewhere have become a powerful force in parts of the CofE. Perhaps more significantly we have seen, as O'Donovan has argued, a change in the character of the liberal tradition: “The historically centripetal middle had become a new centrifugal pole”. *Increasingly the issue has been interpreted within a wider theological paradigm of equality, rights and inclusivity, a shift that the church has not really*

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addressed but which also makes any policy of compromise or accommodation much more difficult to uphold.

A major challenge for this review group and the bishops is how to respond. One route would be to keep a focus on the *principles* of Christian teaching and practice and the need for these to be stated and applied. This might involve reaffirming earlier statements or embracing the alternative “inclusive” vision or seeking to articulate a principled “third way”. Any significant change in teaching would need to address how such a shift can be theologically defended given earlier statements and Scripture. In addition, it would need to show how those adhering to the traditional view will be protected (not just in the church but in wider society) and how their vision of pastoral care can be even tolerated let alone supported.

Another route would be to take a more *pragmatic* approach which acknowledged the diversity of views within the church and sought to encourage recognition of multiple integrities. Here the questions are focussed more on mapping out boundaries within which it is hoped we could hold together while tolerating officially approved but incompatible theologies and practices. The hope would be that campaigners would settle for less than their current demands and enable a greater peace due to a more avowedly pluralist practice. *Personally, I hope that while you will give attention to such pragmatic questions you will work primarily with the need for the CofE to articulate and embody a principled biblical and theological vision for the good of both Christian disciples and our wider society.*

Seventh, there has been a lack of practical teaching and pastoral guidance for those with same-sex attraction and those who seek to encourage and guide them. This represents a disconnect or worse between official teaching and practice. The reality is that the CofE includes a range of responses from those seeking to be faithful followers of Jesus while experiencing same-sex attraction. Some are committed to celibate singleness, others may enter a relationship such as a civil partnership but remain abstinent (as required of clergy), others may be in a sexual same-sex relationship, perhaps in future a civil marriage. *There are serious questions as to whether the Christian church can remain united and, with integrity and effectiveness, practically support all these patterns.* Certainly more guidance is needed about how – both privately and pastorally and also publicly and formally – the church should respond.

The question as to whether a loving same-sex relationship can be sexual is clearly the most divisive issue given Scripture only speaks negatively of same-sex sexual practice. Rather than starting there it may be worth asking whether there is any form of committed same-sex relationship which the church can theologically commend and formally recognise. If not, then an explanation needs to be

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given and an alternative pattern of support offered. If there is then the question is whether or not the church should embrace an existing category – and if so whether it should be civil partnership or marriage. If it cannot embrace either of these then the church needs to consider what pattern of relationship it could establish alongside or alternative to these. Either way, it would need consensus as to the pattern of life to be commended, particularly the nature of the relationship and the responsibilities within it. Here the question of sexual activity inevitably will arise and fundamental differences will therefore still need to be addressed and may prove intractable. This approach may, however, clarify whether there is any possible pattern of relationship – a chaste covenanted friendship - which can be commended with theological integrity and have the support of a significant number of both those committed to traditional teaching and those seeking a more positive approach to committed same-sex relationships.

I must be honest that I am not confident that there is a way of squaring this circle, of finding a path that will keep us together and able to live with theological integrity and coherence and less tension and conflict. The saying that a house divided against itself cannot stand looks more and more applicable not just to the wider Anglican Communion but increasingly to the Church of England. There may, however, still be a way of avoiding that or at least minimising the likely damage caused by current dynamics but this will require the bishops to give urgent attention to those dynamics and how to respond to them both within their own college and in the wider church.