

Statement from the College of Bishops

The College of Bishops met on 27th January, 2014 to begin a process of reflection on the issues raised by the Pilling Report (GS 1929). The College expressed appreciation to Sir Joseph Pilling and to all members of the working party for the work they have done on behalf of the Church.

We are united in welcoming and affirming the presence and ministry within the Church of gay and lesbian people, both lay and ordained. We are united in acknowledging the need for the Church to repent for the homophobic attitudes it has sometimes failed to rebuke and affirming the need to stand firmly against homophobia wherever and whenever it is to be found.

We are united in seeking to be faithful to the Scriptures and the tradition of the Church and in seeking to make a loving, compassionate and respectful response to gay men and women within Church and society.

We recognise the very significant change in social attitudes to sexuality in the United Kingdom in recent years.

We recognise also the strongly held and divergent views reflected in the Pilling Report, across the Anglican Communion and in the Church of England. We acknowledge that these differences are reflected also within the College of Bishops and society as a whole.

We accept the recommendation of the Pilling Report that the subject of sexuality, with its history of deeply entrenched views, would best be addressed by facilitated conversations, ecumenically, across the Anglican Communion and at national and diocesan level and that this should continue to involve profound reflection on the interpretation and application of Scripture. These conversations should set the discussion of sexuality within the wider context of human flourishing.

We have together asked the Archbishops to commission a small group to design a process for these conversations and additional materials to support and enable them. We hope that the outline for the process and the additional materials will be approved by the House of Bishops in May.

We acknowledge that one of the challenges we face is to create safe space for all those involved to be honest about their own views and feelings. This has not always happened and it must do so in the future. We recognise that we will not all agree and that this process is in part committed to seeking good disagreement that testifies to our love for one another across the church in obedience to Christ.

As the Archbishops noted in November, the Pilling report is not a new policy statement from the Church of England and we are clear that the Church of England's pastoral and liturgical practice remains unchanged during this process of facilitated conversation.

No change to the Church of England's teaching on marriage is proposed or envisaged. The House of Bishops will be meeting next month to consider its approach when same sex marriage becomes lawful in England in March.

We are grateful to the whole Church for their prayers for our meeting today and for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We recognise that on many occasions in the past the Church has faced challenging questions. It is vital in these moments to take counsel together, to read and reflect upon the Scriptures and to continue to discern together the mind of Christ.

Comment

1 If the teaching of the Church of England on marriage is unaffected and if the authority of the Scriptures is recognised there is no need for a process of reflection. According to the Church of England, marriage is an honourable estate ordained firstly for the procreation of children, secondly for the avoidance of fornication. This rules out homosexual practice. No "strongly held and divergent views" are to be found in the formularies of the Church of England.

2 The Bishops nevertheless see a problem because they avoid a glaringly necessary clarification of one phrase: "gay and lesbian people". Do they mean practising homosexuals? or people with homosexual inclinations? Is "homophobia" hatred of practising homosexuality or of people with homosexual inclinations? If the latter it is obviously unChristian and unjust, like misogyny, because we are not responsible for how we are made. On the other hand, since the Church is in the world only for the sake of sinners, if homosexual practices are sinful the Church does indeed welcome practising homosexuals—when they repent. It is obviously a perversion of Christianity to welcome the continuance of sin in the baptised. Whatever they mean by *homophobia* there should be no problem for the bishops.

3 They nevertheless again find a problem because "We recognise the very significant change in social attitudes to sexuality in the United Kingdom in recent years." Here is another ambiguity. Recognise = "See that there has been"? or recognise = "acknowledge the validity", as when Her Majesty's government recognises the "opposition" in Syria? If the former, the only question is how the Church is to reimpose its moral understanding upon the commonwealth. If, as seems likely, the latter, the Church is taking its morality from the world and has ceased to be the Church.

The Bishops also take style from the world. Bishops should not use the degraded English of the "media". *Homophobia* is an illiterate coining which if it meant anything would mean *irrational fear of the same*. Fear of sameness (which would not be irrational) is not how the word is used. *Gay* should be *homosexual*, the correct descriptive term.

4 Bishops are *inter alia* charged with maintaining the purity of Christian doctrine. These bishops, having invented a problem, transfer responsibility to "facilitated conversations" right down to diocesan synods. "Is it a wolf or our own sheepdog? We cannot tell: let's ask the sheep." But they warn in advance that in any case the facilitated conversations won't work and we shall have to live with disagreement. How can this be episcopal? St Paul never seeks "good disagreement". "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgement." (1 Corinthians i.10)

The Church of Rome long since refused to recognise Anglican orders. The argument centred on whether there had been proper laying-on of hands, and on relations with the bishop of Rome. Present doubts are practical. Could any authentic successors of the apostles be so muddled and feeble?