

**Chelmsford Diocesan Synod
Presidential Address 11 March 2017**

Following the House of Bishop's report on *Marriage and Same Sex Relationships after the Shared Conversations (GS 2055)* and its subsequent rejection by the General Synod, I thought it might be helpful if I shared where I am on these issues and what it might mean for us in this diocese.

As a bishop in the Church of God it is my particular responsibility and my heartfelt desire to represent and proclaim afresh the faith that is revealed in Holy Scriptures and set forth in the Catholic Creeds. The bishop is the focus of unity for the Church, the person through whom the sharing in the apostolic ministry of Christ is continued, and the guarantee that the Church in this time and place is in continuity and communion with the Church in every time and place. The sad divisions of Christian history and our own impaired communion in response to recent debates over the ordination of women to the priesthood and the episcopate has stretched and sometimes even contorted this fundamental principle of Catholic and Apostolic order. Nevertheless, through our baptism, we are still one Church reaching towards that full and visible communion which is Christ's prayer for his whole church – so that the world may believe. In the diocese of Chelmsford I carry the responsibility for the ordering, unity, ministry and mission of the church. It is sometimes a heavy load to carry, but I want you to know I carry it joyfully, believing it is where God has called me, and that even in our disagreement we are proclaiming something vital to the world; for in virtually every other walk of life disagreement leads to enmity and worse. But this also means that I am not at liberty to merely speak for myself. I therefore make no apology for wanting us to be a church that finds ways of living together with our disagreements, and not letting them drive us apart. I have my views and opinions, of course I do, but I am also 'Father in God' to all of you; and all clergy and licensed ministers make an oath of canonical obedience to me, regardless of disagreement on some issues.

Human sexuality, what it means and how it is expressed in loving, stable and life-giving relationships, is one such area of disagreement. Faithful Christian people read scripture differently on this issue and arrive at different conclusions. This was evident in the debate at General Synod which although difficult was passionate and gracious – and, I might also add, chaired with exemplary fortitude and grace. I am also aware that the group from our diocese that took part in the Shared Conversations under the leadership of the Archdeacon of West Ham found it a helpful and inspiring process and shared their own disagreements with great tact and grace.

So let me put down two markers as this conversation continues. First, none can ignore the ecumenical dimensions of this debate, nor our particular responsibilities and relationships across the Anglican Communion. We cannot do our theology on our own. But, secondly, neither can we ignore the culture in which we are set where same-sex relationships and same-sex marriage are not only considered normal, but positively taught and encouraged in many homes and schools as a social good. And since a large part of our Synod today is happily devoted to thinking about our mission and ministry with children and young people, and because this is one of the biggest and most important challenges we face, it would be particularly foolish for us to ignore the missiological damage that is done when that which is held to be morally normative and desirable by much of society and by what seems to be a significant number of Anglican Christian people in this country, is deemed morally unacceptable by the Church. As I have said before, I am not sure the church has ever before had to face the challenge of being seen as immoral by the culture in which it is set. And though I am proud to confirm that all of us, whatever our views on this matter, are united in our condemnation of homophobia, we must also acknowledge that it is of little comfort to young gay or lesbian members of our Church to know that while prejudice against them is abhorred, any committed faithful sexual expression of their love for another is forbidden. In fact it is worse than this, our ambivalence and

opposition to faithful and permanent same sex relationships can legitimise homophobia in others. None of us are content with this situation.

This issue is, therefore, one that must be dealt with in a number of ways: theologically, ethically, pastorally and missiologically. We must let the insights and experiences of each of these responses shape our overall response. As with the challenges of previous ages, it is the refining fire of the questions the culture poses that reveal new depths to the gospel we proclaim. Also we must acknowledge that the culture itself has to a large extent been shaped by those Christian virtues of tolerance and acceptance that we hold dear. It is therefore not sufficient to say, 'Oh if only we could stop talking about human sexuality and get on with the real business of preaching the gospel!' This is the real business of preaching the gospel: it is about what it means to be made in the image of God and of the new humanity God has won for us in Christ. It is about finding the legitimate boundaries within which Christian people can legitimately disagree.

Nor can we simply ignore the biblical passages that pertain to this debate. They are part of our story and our inheritance. But what we can do is recognise that what we know now about human development and human sexuality requires us to look again at those texts to see what they are actually saying to our situation, for what we know now is not what was known then. Of course this is also an area where conclusions are conflicted (even the rules that govern our biblical hermeneutics) but it does at least demonstrate that we are all seeking to be faithful to scripture and how we interpret it within the contexts we serve.

Many Christians in this diocese were disappointed that the House of Bishops statement did not go further in opening up the possibility of the Church formally blessing same sex unions. I understand this. But I also recognise the principled objection to such change by those who are, after all, only remaining faithful to the Church's traditional and canonical understanding of marriage and human relationships, a position that is shared by the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Church and by a majority of the Anglican Communion.

So having had the House of Bishop's statement rejected, where are we now? Do we simply re-state our current position, and is there any hope for LGBTI+ Christians (and others) that one day their relationships may be affirmed within the Church?

After the Synod debate, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York wrote a letter to the Church in which having made clear that while these issues themselves were divisive and problematic, no person was a problem, and that in order to deal with "real and profound disagreement... we need a radical new Christian inclusion in the Church." They immediately went on to say that "this must be founded in scripture, in reason, in tradition, in theology and the Christian faith as the Church of England has received it; it must be based on good, healthy, flourishing relationships, and in a proper 21st century understanding of being human and of being sexual... The way forward" they said, "needs to be about love, joy and celebration of our common humanity; of our creation in the image of God, of our belonging to Christ - all of us, without exception, without exclusion."

They then went on to invite every "Diocesan Bishop to meet with their General Synod members for an extended conversation in order to establish clearly the desires of every member of Synod for the way forward.' Arrangements for this in our diocese are in hand. I am also planning to meet with gay and lesbian Christians in the diocese to listen to their voices more closely, and before you ask, I already meet regularly with representatives from other constituencies who may take a more traditional view on this issue.

Under the leadership of the Bishop of Newcastle a Pastoral Oversight group with the task of supporting and advising Dioceses on pastoral actions with regard to our current pastoral approach to human sexuality is being set up. The group will include gay and lesbian people, and will seek to discern the development of pastoral practices, within current arrangements.

A new teaching document on the subject of human sexuality will be produced.

These are all positive developments, but I want to say a little more on what they may mean for the Chelmsford diocese. The Archbishops' phrase 'a radical new Christian inclusion' needs some unpacking. It will be in doing this that we find ways forward that both preserve the unity of the church, respect the conscientious disagreement of those who are opposed to any change, and begin to give a greater welcome to gay and lesbian people.

Let me plain: LGBTI+ people are welcome in the churches of the Chelmsford diocese. They are welcome and we want to listen to them and work with them so as to find appropriate ways of expressing their love – for it is not good for human beings to be alone – in permanent, faithful, stable relationships. At the moment there is no consensus in the Church of England for those relationships to be formally blessed in Church, or for the Church of England to embrace same-sex marriage, but the current arrangements do welcome lay people and clergy into civil partnerships and there is no reason why prayers of thanksgiving for these relationships – perhaps a Eucharist - cannot be offered. We do not want same-sex couples to be cut off from the Church, and we want those who come to us seeking God's blessing for their love to receive the guidance, challenge and support of the Church.

Of course, much of this is happening already. We already have many gay and lesbian people in our churches and a good number of clergy are living faithfully in civil partnerships. This debate is particularly hard for them. We end up talking about our LGBTI+ brothers and sisters in Christ as if their presence in the church was some sort of hypothetical possibility that we could argue about. Brothers and sisters, you are already a part of us, and we must repent of the way we have objectified your presence and spoken about you as if you were not here.

Bishop John has already articulated his opinion on where this might lead, inviting us to relook at all human relationships in their broadest theological and missiological terms. Some people have suggested he should not have expressed his own view. As I said earlier, all of us have our individual views. As bishops we have additional responsibilities, but we still have a view, and if we are to move forward then it must be on the basis of honesty with each other about the different ways we see things and with a determination that disagreement on this issue is not the touchstone of orthodoxy or biblical faithfulness. Nor must we always assume this debate is comprised of two opposing camps: one of the speeches at General Synod spoke of the 'silent middle'.

Nikki Groarke, the Archdeacon of Dudley, said that, "While I cannot at this stage support a change to the canons on marriage, I would support the careful introduction of a pastoral liturgy for blessing of gay couples in committed partnerships." This is another view that I suspect may be held by many people, drawing a distinction between marriage and civil partnership.

We made progress on the ordination of women because we agreed that whether we accepted or absented from the view that women could be ordained we were still faithful Anglicans. The irony of saying this today, with Philip North having just stepped down as the prospective Bishop of Sheffield because of the pressure he was under from those who felt his views on the ordination of women rendered him unable to hold together the unity of the diocese, is not lost on me. However let me say two things: first, as is known to some of you, I was a member of the Sheffield CNC and

wholeheartedly supported Philip's appointment. I am therefore hugely disappointed that this opportunity to live out our 'good disagreement' under the Five Guiding Principles has been lost. But, secondly, here in this diocese I believe we are able to respect one another's differences, believe in each other's flourishing, and hold out to a divided world the model of an impaired but still united and still deeply loving communion. Therefore, let me be loud and clear on this issue: whether you believe there should be same sex marriage or the blessing of same sex unions or whether you do not, you are still a faithful Anglican. We need to find ways of living with this diversity, not being torn apart by it.

But even this will, I know, be hard for some people to hear. Some think even this a step too far; and others think it nowhere near far enough. But I hope and pray that even these small steps will make a difference, for the pastoral and missiological implications of this issue, especially with young people, mean that we must do something, and that we cannot simply wait till there is complete ecumenical and Anglican Communion agreement before doing anything. Therefore in unpacking what the Archbishops mean by 'radical new Christian inclusion', and in discerning what this 'something' should be we think carefully, prayerfully, penitently and humbly about how we welcome same sex couples in our churches; we commit ourselves to further listening and conversation; we support the development of new teaching documents and a new process of debate, and to finding next steps to take; but we do it with the clear and unequivocal gospel imperative that all are welcome; that all stand in need of repentance and forgiveness; and that in Christ there is a new humanity.

What I am suggesting, and what I believe the House of Bishops is encouraging, is a next step; and following the wise counsel of Gamaliel, in identifying and taking these next steps, and guided by the Holy Spirit, we will see whether this is of God or not.

+Stephen Chelmsford