

Can we both uphold current teaching and offer greater “pastoral accommodation”?

There is a strong chance the church may attempt to uphold current teaching on marriage and sexual ethics but to pursue some or all of the developments outlined above. This would be to follow and perhaps develop further the pattern of the Church of Scotland (in relation to clergy in same-sex unions) whose proposals were offered as an example in the Conversation resources. It would also follow what was proposed by the Pilling Report which presented this as an extension of pastoral accommodation. It faces, however, three groups of challenges: pragmatic/political, principled and to do with the meaning of pastoral accommodation.

Pragmatic and political challenges

A combination of reaffirming the church’s traditional teaching that marriage is between a man and a woman and the proper place for sex (2-3) while permitting greater freedom for clergy to enter into sexual same-sex unions or offering some form of liturgical celebration of such unions faces a number of major problems in practice.

First, this combination of theological conservatism and practical revisionism is an attempt at compromise, a way of “splitting the difference”, which has very few if any current adherents within the church. The overwhelming majority of those who believe that the current teaching is biblical and who would therefore welcome a decision to retain it also believe that the church is already at the limits, or beyond the limits, of acceptable pastoral accommodation. In contrast, those who would welcome the opportunity for a more affirming stance in practice do so because of their belief that the teaching is wrong and needs changing. They are likely to see the portrayal of these changes in terms of “pastoral accommodation” as patronizing or insulting. Assuming the accommodation did not extend to acceptance of same-sex married clergy and that any authorized or permitted liturgies would clearly be distinguished from marriage (and perhaps even blessing) services (which, in terms of any formal guidance, would be best set out by making clear what was *not* permitted to be included in them) this approach would appear to continue to treat same-sex unions as inherently inferior and thus not meet the fundamental claim for equality.

Second, this approach continues the pattern of approaching our divisions which has shaped recent decades (as set out above) but stretches even further the tensions between theory and practice, theology and pastoral care. These tensions are already felt to have made it difficult to speak and act with integrity and to be so great as to be detrimental to our unity and mission. Continuing with this approach is therefore likely to exacerbate rather than resolve the problems. It seems likely that a significant number of people will continue to see the church’s stance as fundamentally unjust and so campaign strongly to change the teaching and further develop practice. Others, however, will dissent from the pastoral changes and seek to reverse them. It is therefore unlikely that this approach will lead to a new peaceful settlement.

Third, in 2007 the General Synod, in wording from the House of Bishops, solidly supported a motion which recognized that working to prevent “further division and impaired fellowship within the Church of England and the Anglican Communion” meant not “doing anything that could be perceived as the Church of England qualifying its commitment to the entirety of the relevant Lambeth Conference Resolutions”. It seems indisputable that greater acceptance of either clergy in sexual same-sex unions or liturgies relating to such unions will be perceived by the overwhelming

majority of the Communion (much wider than GAFCON) and by a very large part of the Church of England as at best qualifying and at worst reneging on our commitment to Lambeth resolutions. To go down this path is therefore a clear reversal of the 2007 Synod decision and an acceptance of further division and impaired fellowship.

Principled challenges

More fundamentally, this approach appears to be open to the challenge of simply continuing and worsening the habit of institutional hypocrisy that so many, whatever their opinion on this subject, have found so corrosive in the church's response to gay and lesbian people. It amounts to the church continuing to teach that certain behaviour is wrong, falls short of God's purposes and is contrary to Scripture but then moving from simply tolerating it as a form of respected conscientious dissent among baptized believers to commending it through public services and seeing it as no longer a bar to ordination within the church. One of the reasons that this way forward faces such practical challenges is that many who disagree on the morality of same-sex sexual unions will be able to agree on the moral questionableness (at best) of the church teaching one thing while acting in ways seemingly contrary to that teaching. For those seeking change, it appears the church is more affirming but continues to teach in ways that they believe are in error and damaging to gay and lesbian people. For those seeking to uphold traditional teaching it appears to be a case of the church honouring God with its lips but not in its life. From both perspectives it is hard to see how the position has integrity. Pastoral care needs to be related to theology and to biblical teaching even when that is difficult and contested. As Justin Welby explained back in 2004 in relation to his response to gay couples (Quoted in Andrew Atherstone, *Archbishop Justin Welby: Risk-Taker and Reconciler*, p. 127):

Pastorally I would love to say, 'It's fine'. ... I know gay Christian couples who I respect hugely for their spirituality, and in many ways consider infinitely better people than I am – but what I've also discovered in my life since I was a Christian, despite some real failures of the most desperate kind, is that God knows best. ... God speaks through Scripture, and if we follow what Scripture says that is the best love that there is....And although we constantly fail to do that, if we at any point say, 'Well, in this particular area, actually because of more recent understandings or whatever, we're going to do something different', that pastorally, however we feel, however hard it is – and I can't begin to describe how difficult it is to say this – however hard it is, we will be letting down the people that we are dealing with pastorally, because God knows best and the Scripture in the end is clear".

While some have concluded that Scripture is not clear or is affirming, a way forward which reaffirms traditional teaching as biblical but then develops church practice in a more permissive direction amounts to saying that the church still believes that God through Scripture says one thing but that the church herself, pastorally in response to people, says the opposite in practice. Such a method must mean "letting down the people that we are dealing with pastorally", whatever our view on God's will in relation to same-sex couples.

In addition, the challenge of these proposed accommodations is not simply how they have integrity in the light of the teaching. There is also whether and how they have integrity and coherence as a set of practices. In particular, is there any consistency within Anglican theology and practice in

offering liturgical affirmation of a way of life (whether sexual same-sex civil partnerships or same-sex marriages) while preventing clergy from entering that way of life?

Pastoral accommodation

These problems of principle are sometimes addressed by an appeal to pastoral accommodation as a principled approach which explains why divergence between teaching and practice is not as flawed as argued above but justifiable. This appeal has potential in that pastoral accommodation, as defined by Oliver O'Donovan in his evidence to the Pilling Group, refers to an approach which, while "without ultimate dogmatic implications", can be "paradoxical in relation to basic moral belief" in the response it offers to "some urgent presenting needs". The question is at what point in accommodation one moves from paradox into incoherence and/or an undermining of basic moral beliefs. A crucial aspect in walking this tightrope is that, in the words of the Faith and Order Commission's report, [*Men and Women in Marriage*](#) (para 49) proper pastoral accommodation should have the goal of "bearing witness in special ways to the abiding importance of the norm". It achieves this by being an action which can "proclaim the form of life given by God's creative goodness and bring those in difficult positions into closer approximation to it". One example I've heard of such pastoral accommodation is of a group of Christians who found themselves giving thanks on being told by one of their members they had used cannabis in the previous week. This was in the context of supporting someone who was coming off heroin and the cause of thanks was that they had only taken cannabis. While in one sense "paradoxical" - taking cannabis is not normally a cause for thanksgiving – this clearly had no "ultimate dogmatic implications" and was "bearing witness" to the norm as part of enabling the person "into closer approximation to it".

In considering whether, and if so how, any of the proposed extensions of pastoral accommodation in relation to same-sex unions can meet these criteria, it is worth examining some of the other areas which are cited as parallels or precedents for future developments.