

### **How did we get here and where might we go next?**

We have reached our present situation in terms of current teaching and discipline and actual ecclesial reality due to a number of different factors including:

- i. A refusal either to reconsider traditional teaching as set out in the 1987 General Synod motion (and Lambeth 1.10) or to follow through fully in practice the practical logic of that motion's ethical teaching and its call for repentance for all forms of non-marital sexual relationship
- ii. A reticence by most bishops and clergy to teach and to explain the church's position, a growing number of them wishing to see it changed and sometimes campaigning for this, and an emphasis in public statements on ongoing discussion, discernment and diversity of views
- iii. Adherence to the basic principles of 1991 *Issues* which involves affirming the teaching while allowing conscientious lay dissent but expecting clergy to uphold the teaching in their own lives even if they publicly reject it in their teaching
- iv. Increasing pastoral accommodation of same-sex relationships among lay Christians
- v. Respect for the 1998 Lambeth I.10 resolution and the mind and unity of the Anglican Communion while focusing the practical implications of this on refusing to approve liturgies of blessing or clergy in sexual same-sex unions but otherwise permitting pastoral accommodation
- vi. A consequent "double standard" in practice even if not in theory between how teaching relates to clergy and lay people
- vii. Adapting, but very cautiously, to wider and significant cultural changes aware that the church is divided both nationally and internationally on how to respond, an approach strengthened by the 2003 Bishop of Reading crisis and wider Communion difficulties.
- viii. The decision to view civil partnerships as distinct from marriage and so acceptable for clergy but expecting them to be celibate
- ix. The decision, in contrast, to prohibit clergy entering same-sex marriages, to secure strong legal safeguards to prevent such marriages being solemnized within the Church of England and to defend refusing a new licence to a same-sex married clergyman in the face of legal challenge.
- x. A significant number of bishops, clergy, training institutions etc have not upheld the church's official teaching and discipline in practice and minimal or no discipline has been implemented in this area.

In considering how to proceed post-Conversations it is worth evaluating to what extent these (and other) factors have, both individually and collectively, helped or hindered the church's witness in recent decades and thus whether and to what extent they should continue to shape our next steps.

The Pilling Report and anecdotal evidence suggests that there is unlikely to be a change in the church's fundamental teaching and principles (1-3) in the near future. In particular, the need for a 2/3 majority in all houses of Synod for a change in relation to marriage appears unachievable at present. The same sources, however, suggest that what is needed and likely to be sought is greater

“pastoral accommodation” in practice. In other words, while (1)-(3) are unlikely to be formally altered, change is likely to be sought in relation to the practices of the church in relation to lay people (4), clergy (5-7) and liturgy (8-9).

In relation to lay people in same-sex unions the level of official accommodation (4) is now so great that, apart from clearly and officially extending the current pastoral accommodation to licensed lay ministers or taking action against clergy who seek to apply church teaching more rigorously in their ministries, there appears to be only one further step to be made and that relates to offering some form of liturgical celebration for same-sex unions (see below).

In relation to clergy the most likely development would be a removal or loosening of the expectations on clergy and ordinands (5) and hence an adaptation or ending of the requirements that civil partnered clergy and ordinands give assurances their relationship is non-sexual (6). Extending this further to allow clergy to enter same-sex marriage is more unlikely especially given the recent legal defences which have rooted this restriction in the church’s doctrine of marriage (7). However, if same-sex sexual unions are to be permitted to clergy then, as with opposite-sex sexual unions in the form of marriage, it would appear proper that those entering them should be expected to give them a publicly recognized form and this would mean encouraging clergy to enter civil partnerships and/or a distinctive status created by the church.

In relation to liturgy the bishops could be more precise as to what is and is not permitted within “pastoral discretion” and “informal prayer” (8) and/or formally authorize or permit some set form of public or private prayer to be offered to same-sex couples (9). In either case, particularly the latter, there would need to be clarity as to what form of commitment the couple should have made – informal, civil partnership or civil marriage – and what is expected of their pattern of life. Liturgies relating to those who have entered civil marriage represent a particular challenge for a number of reasons including the difficulty of justifying allowing prayers of blessing/thanksgiving for same-sex married couples if clergy continue to be prevented from entering such marriages.

If the above is a fair description of possible developments then a central question that needs to be addressed is whether it is possible to defend these without amending the church’s fundamental teaching and principles (1-3) and in particular to do so, as is increasingly common, by appealing to “pastoral accommodation”. If this is not possible, then consideration needs to be given as to other possible ways forward.