

What is the current ecclesial reality in relation to this teaching and discipline?

The Shared Conversations have made clear what has been obvious for many years: the teaching and official practice of the church is highly contested and also far from universally implemented in practice. In relation to each of the nine areas set out in [my summary of church teaching](#), all apart from the first – that sexual orientation is in itself not a bar to faithful discipleship or ordination - are disputed. A significant body of bishops, clergy and laity dissent to some degree from some, perhaps many, aspects of the current official position, whether from a more conservative or more affirming stance. Furthermore, some of these not only dissent but already disregard the current teaching in practice. As a result there is widespread dissatisfaction with the present reality and it is important to note the main areas of disagreement.

Fundamental teaching and principles (2-3)

The second and third statements relate to the church's ethical teaching and provide a basis for the subsequent practical and pastoral guidance. There has been no formal vote on whether these should change – in part because of the 1998 Lambeth resolution and its subsequent significance - with attention focused on their practical outworking and responding to the rapid changes in wider culture. While in the past dissent was focused on the second of these with calls to cease describing all sexual activity within faithful same-sex unions as wrong it is now increasingly focused on the third – the definition of marriage. Some do defend the church's teaching on marriage while rejecting its negative moral judgment on homosexual practice and they would wish the church to be more affirming of forms of same-sex union while upholding marriage as between a man and a woman. However, among those seeking the church to recognise same-sex sexual unions there appears to be a growing consensus – with both theological and sociological factors shaping it – that even if the church maintains its own definition and discipline in relation to marriage liturgies, church recognition must now include those same-sex unions which are legally recognized as civil marriage.

Lay Christians (4)

The fourth statement relating to lay Anglicans represents the earliest significant example of what is now frequently described as “pastoral accommodation” in terms of how the church responds to those living outside its teaching. Originally in 1991 it was based on the need to respect even an erroneous Christian conscience and was phrased in general terms of providing friendship and understanding to those Christians who conscientiously decided to live contrary to church teaching. In 2005 this was extended so as explicitly to include full admission to baptism, confirmation and communion. This was repeated and elaborated further in 2014 with the statement that those who enter same-sex marriages were “not to be subjected to questioning about their lifestyle” which could be understood as preventing any discussion as to whether they were living in accordance with, or even given serious consideration to, the church's teaching. These developments represent a widening of accommodation which, while seen as limited, grudging and patronizing by some, leave many evangelicals unhappy. This is because of the limits it might place on assisting Christians to grow in understanding of God's will and in personal holiness as part of their discipleship, the inability to apply church teaching in relation to what the church officially views as a form of sexual immorality, and the increasing “double standard” it creates in practice between laity and clergy, even if in theory church teaching applies to everyone.

Clergy (5-7)

The increasing accommodation in relation to lay Christians contrasts with the official stance in relation to clergy set out in the next three statements and also creates significant uncertainties about the expectations on licensed lay ministers. Here an initially seemingly non-accommodating but also trusting and non-inquisitive (“don’t ask, don’t tell”) stance as set out in 1991 *Issues* became more ambiguous in relation to civil partnered clergy in 2005 (extended to candidates for the episcopacy in 2013) but the church’s stance has now been strictly stated and to a degree enforced in relation to those entering same-sex marriages. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence that the practical outworking of the church’s position in relation to seeking assurances from those in civil partnerships (or non-registered same-sex unions) that they are living in conformity with the church’s teaching varies enormously. Some it appears are not asked any questions or are asked simply whether they understand the church’s teaching and not whether they are committed to living in accordance with it. There is no known case of clergy discipline in relation to entering a civil partnership and failing to give assurances. Many committed to the church’s teaching are therefore concerned about apparent institutional duplicity undermining both the coherence of that teaching and the church’s public witness. On the other hand, gay and lesbian ordinands and clergy in a same-sex relationship or hoping for such a relationship often find the current situation a cause of significant stress and a temptation to be less than honest and open. In summary, gay and lesbian clergy are all officially expected (in a way not expected of lay people) to refrain from sexual same-sex relationships as these are contrary to church teaching. If they do enter a same-sex relationship there are three options for them with different consequences: if they give it no formal legal standing they are unlikely to be asked about it unless it gives rise to scandal, if they formalize it as a civil partnership they can expect to be asked whether it is sexual but may not be asked in practice, if they formalize it as a marriage they can expect to be disciplined (without reference as to whether or not it is a sexual relationship) in a manner which does not limit their current ministry but probably makes a move to a new ministry impossible.

Liturgy (8-9)

Finally, the church’s liturgical response to those in same-sex relationships remains far from clear in practice other than there being no authorized public liturgy and a formal prohibition by the House of Bishops on offering services of blessing or marriage. Within this there has developed a large space for clergy discretion as to what can be offered to a same-sex couple. The fundamental teaching and principles of the church are able in practice to be largely replaced by the personal judgment of the individual clergyperson as to what they are happy to offer and believe to be permissible. It is clear that permission for “more informal kind of prayer” is in practice understood by some to extend to public services of thanksgiving or celebration of a same-sex relationship in church with a formal order of service. Some clergy understand the only effective limits to be that the form of prayer cannot be called a marriage service (although the relationship may be described as a marriage if it is recognized as such in law and may contain elements similar to those in a marriage service) or a service of blessing (although the service may include a blessing of the couple’s relationship). Other clergy may wish to offer some form of public service but feel uncertain as to what they can and cannot do within the current teaching and discipline and so refrain. In both these cases there is a desire for greater guidance and clarity or formal authorization in relation to the forms of public prayer which can be offered. However, many others, while perhaps open to some celebration of

celibate same-sex friendships, see all such liturgical affirmations of same-sex unions not as legitimate pastoral accommodation but as a rejection and undermining of the church's teaching and witness and therefore something which the church should seek to prevent rather than officially assist or affirm.