

Understanding Synod's July 2017 Sexuality Debates and Votes

This papers offers an analysis of the amendments and the voting patterns, particularly among those (mainly evangelicals) who supported the two substantive amendments.

Conversion Therapy

Saturday's debate on Conversion Therapy was particularly complicated with no less than 4 amendments being voted on before the final vote, two of them being carried thus leading to a significantly different motion from that original proposed. The fact there were 5 time-consuming votes by Houses also meant there was very limited debating time in the just under 90 minutes taken by Synod. Jayne Ozanne had 10 minutes to [introduce her motion](#) and there were then three 3-minute speeches from the floor before Sean Doherty and Jamie Harrison each had 3 minutes to speak to their amendments. Now half an hour in, there followed 4 short speeches from the floor (including one from the Bishop of Liverpool, the only bishop called until York's last minute interjection and a surprise given the Bishop of Carlisle, the bishop with responsibility for health, was expected to be called) before general debate was closed after a powerful emotional testimony in a maiden speech from a young gay member of Synod about his own experience of 'conversion therapy'. Jayne Ozanne then resisted the Doherty amendment as did Simon Butler (who said that he believed some in the church were causing harm to others and that he felt terrified sometimes when going to an EGGs [Evangelical Group on General Synod] meeting because of what he was likely to face) and John Appleby. There followed a vote by Houses which defeated Doherty's amendment and Harrison then formally moved his which was accepted by Ozanne. Barron then moved her amendment to Harrison which was also defeated after no further debate. Dotchin's amendment was then moved and welcomed by Ozanne and after a sudden intervention by the Archbishop of York was welcomed by Ozanne and voted on with no debate. It was then carried as, after a short response to the debate by Ozanne, was the final motion as amended.

The original motion read:

That this Synod:

(a) endorse the statement of 16 January 2017 signed by The UK Council for Psychotherapy, The Royal College of General Practitioners and others¹ that the practice of conversion therapy has no place in the modern world, is unethical, harmful and not supported by evidence; and

¹ "We the undersigned UK organisations wish to state that the practice of conversion therapy has no place in the modern world. It is unethical and harmful and not supported by evidence. Conversion Therapy is the term for therapy that assumes certain sexual orientations or gender identities are inferior to others, and seeks to change or suppress them on that basis. Sexual orientations and gender identities are not mental health disorders, although exclusion, stigma and prejudice may precipitate mental health issues for any person subjected to these abuses. Anyone accessing therapeutic help should be able to do so without fear of judgement or the threat of being pressured to change a fundamental aspect of who they are". Signed by *The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, The British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies, The British Psychoanalytic Council, The British Psychological Society, The College of Sexual and Relationship Therapists, GLADD – The Association of LGBT Doctors and Dentists, The National Counselling Society, National Health Service Scotland, Pink Therapy, The Royal College of General Practitioners, The Scottish Government, Stonewall, The UK Council for Psychotherapy.*

(b) call upon the Archbishops' Council to become a co-signatory to the statement on behalf of the Church of England.

Item 55 – Doherty Amendment (FAILED in all 3 Houses)

The Revd Dr Sean Doherty (London) proposed to replace the Ozanne motion with one that provided a theological account of its stance, set out criteria by which to assess various practices, and sought guidelines from the bishops. It asked Synod instead to

(a) note the statement of 16 January 2017 signed by The UK Council for Psychotherapy, The Royal College of General Practitioners and others concerning the practice of conversion therapy;

(b) affirm that all sexuality is equally affected by the Fall and that therefore Christian therapies and pastoral practices which assume otherwise are not warranted;

(c) affirm that pastoral care, prayer ministry and professional counselling are legitimate means of supporting individuals who choose them freely, provided that they respect the proper dignity of human beings and do not involve coercion or manipulation or make unwarranted promises about the removal of unwanted feelings; and

(d) ask the House of Bishops to draw up guidelines for work in this area to discourage inappropriate pastoral practices, and to encourage good ones.

Voting on Doherty Amendment – Bishops: 10-26-2; Clergy: 64-110-2; Laity: 88-97-6

The vote on this was supported mainly by members of EGGs (the Evangelical Group on General Synod) who would identify as traditionalists on matters of sexual ethics although not all of them backed it. It gained the support of 10 bishops (26.3%):

- Tim Dakin (Winchester)
- Julian Henderson (Blackburn)
- James Newcome (Carlisle)
- Christopher Cocksworth (Coventry)
- Alastair Redfern (Derby)
- Robert Innes (Europe)
- Andrew Watson (Guildford)
- Donald Allister (Peterborough)
- Pete Broadbent (Willesden)
- Alistair Magowan (Ludlow)

Other bishops who might have been expected to support it either did not vote, presumably because they were absent (Bristol, Chester, Durham, Southwell & Nottingham) or voted against (Birmingham, Leicester) or abstained (Bath & Wells). The proportion of supporters was much greater among clergy (64, 36.4%) and especially laity (88, 46.1%).

What is interesting is what happened to these votes over the rest of the debate and the next four votes and in particular the very different trajectory among the bishops compared to the clergy and especially the laity.

Item 56 – Harrison Amendment (PASSED in all 3 Houses)

Dr. Jamie Harrison (Durham) asked Synod to replace the Ozanne wording with the following:

- (a) endorse the Memorandum of Understanding on Conversion Therapy in the UK of November 2015, signed by The Royal College of Psychiatrists and others, that the practice of gay conversion therapy has no place in the modern world, is unethical, potentially harmful and not supported by evidence; and
- (b) call upon the Church to be sensitive to, and to listen to, contemporary expressions of gender identity.

The passing of this had a number of significant effects:

- i. It replaced “the practice of conversion therapy has no place in the modern world, is unethical, harmful and not supported by evidence” with “the practice of gay conversion therapy has no place in the modern world, is unethical, *potentially* harmful and not supported by evidence” (italics added).

This is significant on two fronts: (i) almost everyone accepts that, as with many therapies, “conversion therapy” has the potential to harm and so this is much less contentious, (ii) it removed the sole explicit justification for the claim the practice is unethical – harmful therapies are clearly unethical, potentially harmful therapies are not necessarily and so why it is unethical remains unclear.

- ii. It endorsed an earlier, more widely supported statement – not “the statement of 16 January 2017 signed by The UK Council for Psychotherapy, The Royal College of General Practitioners and others” but “the Memorandum of Understanding on Conversion Therapy in the UK of November 2015, signed by The Royal College of Psychiatrists and others”
- iii. It thereby redefined the widely contested focus of the motion – “Conversion Therapy”

The 2017 statement in the original motion as proposed stated:

Conversion Therapy is the term for therapy that assumes certain sexual orientations or gender identities are inferior to others, and seeks to change or suppress them on that basis

The 2015 statement in the final motion stated:

‘Conversion therapy’ is the umbrella term for a type of talking therapy or activity which attempts to change sexual orientation or reduce attraction to others of the same sex. It is also sometimes called ‘reparative’ or ‘gay cure’ therapy.

There are at least four changes of note here:

- 1) The removal of “gender identities” which was recognised by the Harrison amendment also including clause (b) calling upon the church “to be sensitive to, and to listen to, contemporary expressions of gender identity”.
- 2) The definition of the therapy as “a type of talking therapy or activity”
- 3) The widening to include not just attempting to change or suppress sexual orientations but any attempt “to reduce attraction to others of the same sex”

- 4) The removal of the assumption of inferiority (another possible ground for it being judged “unethical”) as the basis for the therapy

It is far from clear that Synod members realised or weighed all these changes or what their significance is. The 2015 statement was also much clearer that it was “psychological therapies” that are “unethical and potentially harmful” and that “For people who are unhappy about their sexual orientation – whether heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual – there may be grounds for exploring therapeutic options to help them live more comfortably with it, reduce their distress and reach a greater degree of acceptance of their sexual orientation”.

Voting on Harrison Amendment - Bishops: 35-1-2; Clergy: 142-25-7; Laity: 165-20-5

Harrison, also a member of EGGS, who abstained on the Doherty amendment, had developed this amendment in discussion with Jayne Ozanne in order to find something that could be agreed and she voted for it. It was carried in all 3 Houses by strong majorities.

The supporters of the Doherty amendment, having lost that, overwhelmingly supported Harrison. Among the bishops all but one of the Doherty supporters (Coventry, who abstained) voted for Harrison. Bath & Wells abstained and Lincoln alone opposed it. Only one pro-Doherty clergyman (Atherstone) voted against it, but 2 abstained and 2 didn't vote, giving Harrison 59 of his 142 votes. The pro-Doherty laity were more cautious about Harrison – 9 against, 3 abstentions and 1 non-vote – perhaps because of its blanket condemnation of all ‘conversion therapy’ as ‘unethical’. But still 75 of Harrison's 165 lay votes were pro-Doherty. The overwhelming majority of Doherty supporters seemed to believe it was better to have a final vote on Harrison (whose definition of ‘conversion therapy’ removed reference to gender identities and replaced ‘harmful’ with ‘potentially harmful’) than Ozanne even though most of the clergy and laity among them, as we shall see, did not then support the final motion.

This raises the interesting question of what would have happened if more had been of the view, “I prefer Harrison to Ozanne but as I still could not support it on a final vote I will vote against his amendment” and voted accordingly. Harrison would still likely have passed – it would have required 59 (out of 64) pro-Doherty clergy or 73 (out of 88) pro-Doherty laity to vote against his amendment at this stage for it to fail – but the vote might have been much closer. That may have then impacted the debate eg the bishops might have realised how unhappy many evangelical clergy and laity were even with Harrison's modified proposal. If Harrison had failed then the final vote would have been on Ozanne's original motion and would likely have been much closer.

Item 57 – Baron Amendment (FAILED in Bishops)

Before the vote on the Harrison amendment there was an amendment proposed to his amendment. This was because the original request for “the Archbishops' Council to become a co-signatory to the statement on behalf of the Church of England” was no longer in the motion. Ms Christina Baron (Bath & Wells) sought to reinsert this, now in relation to the 2015 Memorandum, only failing (after no specific debate on its proposal) because of a tied vote (16-16-5) in the House of Bishops (Clergy: 117-46-12; Laity: 108-73-11; Synod totals: 241-135-28)

Voting on Baron Amendment - Bishops: 16-16-5; Clergy: 117-46-12; Laity: 108-73-11

Paper by Andrew Goddard, 25th July 2017.

In this vote, 8 of the pro-Doherty bishops voted against (Willesden voted for, Derby didn't vote). They were joined by 8 others (Birmingham, Chelmsford, Leicester, St Albans, Truro, Forces Synodical Council, Huddersfield and Beverley) and there were 5 abstentions including the 2 Archbishops. As a result, despite strong votes for the amendment among clergy (117-46-12) and laity (108-73-11) it fell as it lacked a majority among the bishops. Most of those voting against were pro-Doherty supporters in both clergy (40 out of 64 Doherty supporters) and laity (61 out of 88 Doherty supporters).

Item 58 – Dotchin Amendment (PASSED in all 3 Houses)

This final amendment, proposed by the Revd Andrew Dotchin (St Edmundsbury & Ipswich) called “on the government to ban the practice of Conversion Therapy”.

After a passionate speech by the proposer, who ended almost in tears, there was a call for closure of the debate but before the vote was called the Chair (The Bishop of Manchester) called The Archbishop of York who also made an impassioned appeal for it to pass. The immediate call for closure was then carried by a show of hands so a vote occurred without any debate. This meant that no thought was given to the counter-arguments such that – as shown by the change in definition in the course of the debate – this is a legal quagmire facing all the dangers associated with other legislation seeking to implement well-meaning bans whether on “dangerous dogs” or attempts to “promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality” This failure to debate helps explain the higher (though, in the circumstances, surprisingly small) number of abstentions.

Voting on Dotchin Amendment - Bishops: 28-2-5; Clergy: 121-34-16; Laity: 120-52-18

It was here that the differences between the bishops and the clergy and laity, especially among supporters of the Doherty amendment, was most stark. Among bishops only 2 (Leicester and Ludlow) voted against although 5 abstained (Carlisle, Coventry, Lincoln, St Albans, Huddersfield) and Bath & Wells and Willesden did not register a vote. So of the 10 pro-Doherty bishops, a majority (6 – Winchester, Blackburn, Derby, Europe, Guildford, Peterborough) voted for the government to ban something the Doherty amendment sought to prevent the church explicitly condemning as unethical.

The clergy – and even more the laity – were not as convinced. 34 of the clergy (33 of them pro-Doherty) opposed the amendment as did 52 laity (49 of them pro-Doherty). There was also a significant rise in abstentions and unrecorded votes. Of those clergy who supported Doherty, 14 abstained (joined by 2 others) and 5 didn't vote leaving only 12 of the 64 clergy supporters of the Doherty amendment (less than 20%) supporting a legal ban. The laity were even more resistant to being bounced into a decision – 18 abstained (13 of them Doherty supporters, 1 of whom also didn't vote) – although 25 of the 88 lay Doherty supporters (over 25%) voted for the legislative ban.

Item 12 – Final Vote (PASSED in all 3 Houses)

Voting on Final Motion - Bishops: 36-1-0; Clergy: 135-25-13; Laity: 127-48-13

The Synod then moved to vote on the new motion – Harrison plus Dotchin. It was here where the different trajectory of Doherty supporters among clergy and laity compared to bishops became most

stark. Only one bishop voted against the final motion and none abstained (the only bishop who appears to have left, before the Dotchin vote, was Salisbury). Although there has been speculation that Christopher Cocksworth (Chair of the Teaching Document Co-ordinating Group) may have again pressed the wrong button to put himself in another minority of 1 as in February, in fact his vote against makes total sense given his voting pattern. Having supported Doherty he then abstained or opposed every other amendment and so to vote against the final motion was logical. It also made him in line with majority of pro-Doherty clergy and laity but it meant that of the 10 pro-Doherty bishops, 9 supported the final motion.

Among the clergy, there was significantly less acceptance of the final wording among those who had supported Doherty. Only 23 of the 64 voted for the final motion with more (25) voting against and a significant number either abstaining (13) or not voting (3). Significantly, a majority of those who had voted for both Doherty and then the Harrison amendment (which was the main body of the final motion, with the addition of the Dotchin call for a legal ban) still nevertheless opposed the final motion – only 22 Doherty supporters who favoured Harrison voted for the final motion whereas 24 voted against and 12 abstained and 1 didn't register a vote.

The laity supporting Doherty were even less convinced than the clergy. Of the original 88 Doherty supporters, 48 rejected the final motion, 12 abstained and 3 didn't register a vote. Thus only 25 of them voted for the final resolution (19 of these had just voted for Dotchin, 3 pro-Dotchin then opposed the final motion and 3 didn't vote). Even among those Doherty supporters who had originally supported the Harrison amendment, a large majority (39-23 with 10 abstentions and 3 no votes) now voted against it in its final form.

In summary, through the debate the bishops who had supported Doherty seem then to have backed Harrison not simply as a tactic but with some conviction. Furthermore, most surprisingly, the majority of them even backed Dotchin's ban. As a result, by the end all but 1 were happy to support the final motion. In sharp contrast, the clergy and even more the laity who had supported Doherty remained, on the whole, opposed to the final motion (even though they had overwhelmingly backed Harrison's amendment). Many of them therefore then felt let down, even betrayed, by the bishops who had either never backed Doherty or who, having done so and lost, committed themselves to the final motion.

Welcoming Transgender People

The motion on Welcoming Transgender People came from the Diocese of Blackburn and was presented by the Revd Chris Newlands.

That this Synod, recognising the need for transgender people to be welcomed and affirmed in their parish church, call on the House of Bishops to consider whether some nationally commended liturgical materials might be prepared to mark a person's gender transition.

There was one amendment proposed (which failed) and it was then passed with clear majorities in all 3 Houses. As there was only one amendment less time was spent in voting than on Saturday which allowed for a fuller debate. As usual the proposer spoke for 10 minutes and there followed two speeches with a 5 minute limit and the amendment introduced by Land. Speeches of 3 minutes were opened by the Bishop of Hereford and followed by 3 others before Land formally moved his

amendment which was resisted by Newlands in his response. In the debate on Land there were six contributors including a warning by one speaker that if it was passed then the trans-student whose story she shared may have ended his life before the church had a response. An hour into the debate Land was voted on and rejected in all 3 houses. There then followed 4 contributions on a 2-minute limit including the Bishop of Worcester before the Archbishop of York again interrupted the move to closure to make a short speech and Chris Newlands responded to the debate.

The motion as proposed and passed fell into two parts. The first recognised the need for transgender people “to be welcomed and affirmed in their parish church”. This could be understood as uncontentious and the Archbishop of York, in his intervention before the vote, argued that nobody in Synod would oppose this. However, concerns had been raised before the debate about both about its embracing of the descriptor “transgender people” and the addition of “affirmed” to “welcomed” which could easily be interpreted as affirming not simply someone’s humanity but their self-understanding as transgender.

The second part was also claimed by the Archbishop to be uncontroversial as it simply asked the bishops to *consider whether* nationally commended liturgical materials *might* be prepared and so made no change. However, this language was necessary as liturgical materials cannot be demanded by Synod. The most likely outcome is perhaps now that, as the Bishop of Hereford stated on behalf of the Liturgical Commission (and as Sonya Doragh’s earlier contribution illustrated was possible), the bishops will state that resources already exist (for example, the reaffirmation of baptismal vows could be made by someone using their new name). Some conservatives voted for the final motion (and even against the Land amendment) on the basis that this would be the bishops’ response. However, as these existing liturgies are not specific to those who have transitioned, this way forward, although probably acceptable to many supporters of the motion, may lead to a backlash from those originally sponsoring the motion and those who clearly spoke for a more tailored liturgy for those who had transitioned. More widely, media reports focussed on liturgies for those who have transitioned and so a failure to produce any will lead to reactions from those expecting this development.

Item 59 – Land Amendment (FAILED in all 3 Houses)

The amendment put to Synod came from Dr Nick Land (York), like Doherty and Harrison a member of EGGs. As with Doherty’s proposal it sought to offer a theological framing, recognise the complexities, stress the theological basis of liturgy, and ask for more work from the bishops:

- a) recognize the dignity of all people as made in the image of God and so affirm our commitment to welcome unconditionally in all our churches people who experience (or who have experienced) gender dysphoria;
- b) acknowledge different understandings around gender dysphoria and the field of gender identity more widely;
- c) consider that the preparation of liturgies to mark gender transition raises substantial theological and pastoral issues that the Church of England has not yet considered;

and

d) ask the House of Bishops to consider the theological, pastoral and other issues that gender transition raises for the Church and to report back to General Synod by the end of this quinquennium.

Voting on Land Amendment - Bishops: 11-19-2; Clergy: 64-103-4; Laity: 75-108-3

Among the bishops there were 11 who supported Nick Land's amendment. This included 8 of the 10 who supported Doherty (Winchester, Blackburn, Carlisle, Coventry, Europe, Guildford, Willesden and Ludlow) joined by York, Birmingham and Southwell & Notts (absent on Saturday). Peterborough, though a supporter of Doherty, opposed Land. Derby (pro-Doherty), along with Bath & Wells, appears to have been absent as still were Durham, Bristol and Chester among possible supporters. Canterbury and Chichester both abstained on the amendment. Leicester, as on Saturday, opposed it.

The same number of clergy supported Land as had backed Doherty but the composition was slightly different. 56 of the Land 64 had backed Doherty the day before but 8 were new (2 of them seemingly absent on Saturday). Only 2 of Doherty's clergy supporters opposed Land but 3 abstained and 3 didn't register a vote.

Among laity significantly fewer supported Land than had supported Doherty (75 compared to 88) and there was even more movement. Some supported Land who had not backed Doherty (Land himself was absent on Saturday, Harrison who had abstained on Doherty now supported Land). Exactly $\frac{3}{4}$ of Doherty lay supporters (66) also supported Land with 15 of them opposing (and 2 abstaining and 5 not voting).

Item 13 Blackburn Motion: Welcoming Transgender People – (CARRIED in all 3 Houses)

With the failure of Land and no further amendments the final vote once again revealed the different attitudes of bishops compared to clergy and laity following the defeat of their amendment.

Voting on Blackburn Motion - Bishops: 30-2-2; Clergy: 127-28-16; Laity: 127-48-8

As on Saturday, the bishops coalesced around the final motion after another strong call to do so from the Archbishop of York (despite his original support for Land – a lay member from York diocese). Although not as strong as on Saturday, again a clear majority (7) of the 11 pro-Land bishops voted for the final motion with only 1 (Willessden, joined by Fulham) opposed. However, 2 abstained (Blackburn, likely unwilling to vote against the motion of his own Diocesan Synod, and Ludlow) and one (Guildford) did not register a vote. Interestingly, the bishops who had backed both Doherty on Saturday and Land on Sunday were split down the middle on this final vote with only 4 of the 8 supporting Land (Winchester, Carlisle, Coventry and Europe).

In sharp contrast, among the clergy, only 19 of the 64 supporters of Land then gave their support to the Blackburn motion with 28 opposed, 15 abstaining and 2 not voting. The pro-Land laity were even less supportive. Although they also provided 19 votes for the final motion, well over double that number (47) and so a clear majority of original Land supporters voted against (joined by someone who had earlier rejected Land) and another 6 abstained and 3 didn't vote.

Conclusion

This analysis of the two debates and 7 electronic votes by Houses raises a number of interesting questions, the answers to which may prove significant in future debates relating to sexuality, particularly among evangelicals and others supporting traditional teaching and practice:

- Why did both amendments get such relatively little support among bishops compared to clergy and, even more, laity?
- Why, after the failure of the amendments, were bishops who supported them so amenable and laity so hostile (with clergy somewhere in between the two) to supporting the final motion?
- Can evangelical supporters of the original amendments explain the different dynamics between the Houses and in particular how do the bishops relate to the clergy and laity who responded in such a different way to them?
- Are there good rules of principle in voting eg should one vote for an amendment viewed as “less bad” and likely to gain support of the middle ground even if one would not support it if carried?
- Why did so many Doherty supporters, particularly among the bishops, support the Dotchin amendment calling for a legal ban on conversion therapy? Does this say something about the atmosphere of the debate and how people respond when there has been no reasoned corporate deliberation on the question being asked but strong emotional appeals?