

CHRIST CHURCH COURSES

LIVING IN LOVE AND FAITH

SESSION 6: IMPLICATIONS OF CHANGE

Learning Aim: by the end of the session participants will have a good understanding of the possible changes that the Church of England could put in place and the possible implications of making these changes.

Pastoral aim: that the group have the opportunity to consider the implications of all courses of action over the coming years and an appreciation that whatever happens care will need to be taken to support different groups of Christians who will be challenged or disappointed by whatever happens.

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LIVING IN LOVE AND FAITH

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In the last session we considered the case for change to the current teaching and practice of the Church of England. In this session we consider what change might look like if it were to happen and what implications that might have.

Let us pray.....

We pray Come Holy Spirit. Grant us the openness to hear your voice. The wisdom to discern through your voice, your command and your heart. The humility to receive, to be challenged and to see things afresh as you lead us. In the name of your Son, our savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

2. STORY TIME 1: Anton

Anton is gay and worships in a church in London. Watch Anton's story at <https://lhf.churchofengland.org/mod/videotime/view.php?id=584>

3. THE CURRENT SITUATION

Earlier in the course we learned that the current teaching of the church, consistent with the declarations in the constitution of CEEC, is as follows:

- Marriage and sex are gifts from God
- Marriage is between a man and a woman
- The rightful place for sex is between a man and a woman within marriage
- Those who are not married should exercise abstinence

This means the following practical implications for the Church of England:

Same sex attraction: all of God's people have dignity as people made in the image of God therefore all are welcome to be part of the body of Christ. As with all members of the body of Christ this calling brings with it a need to repent of sinfulness and obedience to God's commands. This means celibacy for wholly same sex attracted Christians.

Challenge for Change: This does not allow same sex attracted Christians to flourish and denies both their identity as same sex attracted people and causes harm to their self esteem and mental health. It also sounds like hypocrisy to say "welcome" while denying a full lived experience of being same sex attracted. In reality "coming out" in church can be a painful experience leaving the same sex attracted Christian feeling judged and isolated while some feel supported and loved.

Same sex sexual activity: this is to be avoided. This means that same sex attracted Christians need to be celibate. This is the same requirement laid on other sex attracted Christians. In reality many churches that are strong on same sex sexuality do not challenge sex before marriage for others. Most couples who ask to marry in church are already living together for a host of reasons including financial and as the recognised next step in a serious relationship – move in together and then marry later. There is the added issue of "how do you know?" Assumptions can be made about the sex lives of others in church for which there is only circumstantial evidence.

Challenge for change: same sex attracted Christians should be welcomed and treated like anybody else regardless of their sex lives. Human flourishing is achieved when all individuals are welcomed regardless of their (legally lived) sex lives which are no business of anybody else. Love is to be celebrated whatever form it takes.

Same Sex Marriage: The Church of England is actively prevented in law from offering marriage to same sex couples. Churches cannot hold services of blessing for same-sex couples who marry in a registry office either.

Challenge for change: organisations and groups such as The Campaign for Equal Marriage, Inclusive Church and MoSAIC all argue for equality of marriage so that same sex couples will not be discriminated against by being denied a marriage in their local parish church which is a legal right for other sex couples (subject to certain conditions). Couples who have married in a civil ceremony should also, these groups would argue, be allowed to receive a blessing.

Ministry: GS2055¹ the House of Bishops' paper that was "not noted" at General Synod in 2017 reaffirmed the teaching of the church as well as the requirements on clergy. Under Canon Law clergy are required to uphold the teaching of the church and to model it. For many years, clergy were asked if they abided by the requirements of the 1991 report *Issues in Human Sexuality* which meant that while being same sex attracted did not prevent someone being ordained, being sexually active did. This

¹ <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/GS%202055%20Marriage%20and%20Same%20Sex%20Relationships%20after%20the%20Shared%20Conversations%20A%20Report%20from%20the%20House%20of%20Bishops.pdf>

means that even if clergy entered into a civil partnership then that would be on the basis that the relationship was celibate.

Clergy are not permitted to marry and continue to minister in their ordained role. Further, the incumbent's responsibility is to maintain the teaching of the church as they receive it. This means that in some churches same sex attracted lay leaders who are in active relationships or any leader who teaches that same sex sexual activity is permitted has led to those leaders being asked to stand down from leadership roles.

Challenge for change: being prevented from ministry because of one's sexuality is discrimination and should not happen. All should be able to lead based on ability not on their sexuality and sexual practice. It is demeaning to have to disclose, even implicitly, one's sex life or to have assumptions made about it because of the role that is held.

Which change has the greatest priority – sexual activity, marriage or ministry? Has the case for change been made in your opinion?

4. STORY TIME: Bill, Jayne and Luke

Luke came out to his parents, Bill and Jayne, who then had to reassess what they believed. Watch the video of Bill, Jayne and Luke's story at <https://lfc.churchofengland.org/mod/videotime/view.php?id=579>

5. THE OPTIONS FOR CHANGE

The following options are available for change:

Change the official teaching of the church to say that same sex sexual activity is not a sin: this would then facilitate several of the other options below but is not necessary to do so (see Methodist idea of "two understandings" below).

Blessing of Same Sex Marriages: a liturgical response would be to create an option to bless and give thanks for a same sex marriage (or civil partnership). This would be added to the Common Worship resources as an option for clergy to use. This would need General Synod approval.

Same Sex Marriage: to introduce marriage for same sex couples would require not only General Synod approval and a change to Canon law but also a change to the Same Sex Marriage Act 2014.

Ministry: allowing same sex attracted clergy who marry to remain in ordained ministry; encourage clergy to be open to lay leadership who are in a same sex marriage or teach positively about them.

What are your thoughts about each of these possible changes?

6. PASTORAL ACCOMODATION

The Church of England has made the following changes in recent years:

Re-marrying in Church

This is at the individual clergy discretion with approval by the Bishop and no one is required to marry someone in church who was previously divorced. There are boundaries to pastoral situations that warrant allowing a second marriage in church.

Ordination of women Priests and Bishops

Some parishes do not agree theologically with the ordination of women. Each parish PCC when they are in vacancy are asked to decide whether they will accept a woman priest. They have the option of specifying in the parish profile that they will only consider male candidates. Those parishes that have a woman Bishop have the possibility of seeking "alternative episcopal oversight" where a male Bishop would be given charge over the parish from outside the Diocese.

As we saw in the last session the **Methodist Church**, having agreed to allow same sex marriage, has made it an "**opt in**" by each church where the default position is that marriage is between a man and a woman.

It is likely therefore that any change would be optional and no **church or clergy member would be required** to either bless a same sex union nor marry a same sex couple.

What are your thoughts about Pastoral Accommodation? Is it a good compromise or a compromised gospel?

7. POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS OF CHANGE

We will use the remaining segments of *The Beautiful Story* to hear what the implications of a change to the doctrine or practice of the Church of England might be for evangelicals and others. We will then consider the implications of not changing for those who seek change. We will use these as pointers for our time of prayer.

A. HARMFUL IMPLICATIONS

Watch the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VeuUbFF6CII>

How would you respond to a Nigerian Christian in the face of persecution who is concerned about the change in teaching on sexuality?

How can the church care for celibate gay Christians if the teaching and practice of the church is changed on sexuality? Is there really no safe space for them?

If this is a red line for a number of church leaders (and/or parishes) what might that mean for the church?

Is campaigning for no change motivated by protecting Christians from eternal harm?

⁴² "If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea. (Mark 9:42)

B. THE SHAPE OF THE FUTURE

Watch the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOnmtAM6Yik>

Would a change to teaching and practice make you want to leave the Church of England – either individually or as a church? Might it help you to stay?

²⁸ Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. (Acts 20:28)

C. UNITE

Watch the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2N9laD7N7zQ>

Is the orthodox traditional view a compelling vision for the church?

Is God birthing a new thing from this painful time for the church?

⁸ So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner. Rather, join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God. (2 Tim 1:8)

D. ENGAGE

Watch the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjsmL8kWir8>

Has your engagement with LLF been positive and fruitful?

Should we long to teach the real Jesus – all grace, all truth, all of the time?

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14)

8. DISAPPOINTMENT

What would people feel like who press for change and do not achieve it?

The **Campaign for Equal Marriage**² has the following aims:

- *For same-sex couples to be able to be married in Church of England parishes.*
- *For people in such marriages to have the same opportunities for lay and ordained ministry in the Church of England as anyone else.*
- *We believe that the consciences of everyone should be protected – no member of the clergy should be forced to conduct a marriage they disagree with. No member of the clergy should be prevented from celebrating a marriage of a same-sex couple*

Inclusive Church³ has the following statement:

*We believe in **inclusive church** – a church which **celebrates and affirms every person** and does not discriminate.*

*We will continue to challenge the church where it continues to discriminate against people on grounds of **disability, economic power, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, learning disability, mental health, neurodiversity, or sexuality.***

*We believe in a Church which **welcomes and serves all people** in the name of Jesus Christ; which is scripturally faithful; which seeks to proclaim the Gospel afresh for each generation; and which, in the power of the Holy Spirit, allows all people to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Jesus Christ.”*

MoSAIC⁴ has the following aim:

MoSAIC seeks a church where the God given potential of all is fully embraced and celebrated - calling for an end to all discrimination against people due to economic power, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, learning disability, physical disability, neurodiversity, mental health, or sexuality.

General Synod may receive a paper proposing changes to teaching and practice after the LLF process (from November 2022 onwards). If this is rejected then all those who have campaigned for change may find their own red lines have been crossed as far as the Church of England is concerned.

² <https://cofe-equal-marriage.org.uk/about/#aims>

³ <https://www.inclusive-church.org/the-ic-statement/>

⁴ <https://mosaicanglicans.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/journeying-together-jan-2021.pdf>

The result of LLF and all the debates that have preceded it is likely to end with one group or other (or possibly all depending on the outcome!) feeling that “the Church has let them down”.

This is a matter for prayer.

9. TIME FOR PRAYER (10m)

Together we pray for:

- the Anglican Communion,
- the Church of England,
- Southwark Diocese
- Christ Church
- ourselves

Ask God to guide us through what we have explored so far.

8. STORY TIME: Alex and Jo (5m)

Alex is transitioning and has been in a committed relationship with Jo for some time.

Watch the video of Alex and Jo’s story at

<https://llf.churchofengland.org/mod/videotime/view.php?id=578>

9. TIME FOR REFLECTION (5m)

Together we sit in silence and ask God to guide us through what we have explored so far.

Next time we will be considering the issues around gender. Please read the notes before the session so that we can spend time on discussion. Please note that this session will be 120 minutes rather than 90.