

Submission to House of Bishops Sexuality Review

1.0 Information about Accepting Evangelicals:

1.1 Accepting Evangelicals is a network of evangelical Christians who believe that the time has come to move towards the acceptance of faithful, loving same-sex partnerships at every level of church life, and the development of a positive Christian ethic for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

1.2 Our members are evangelicals who believe that loving, faithful same-sex relationships built on mutual commitment and self-giving love are not condemned in the Bible as well as people who are willing to accept the Christian integrity of those who affirm same-sex relationships, although they do not personally hold this view.

1.3 We currently have over 450 members, of whom Anglicans are by far the largest group.

2.0 Spectrum of views on sexuality in the Church

2.1 There can be little argument that there is a wide spectrum of views on sexuality in the Church.

2.2 Those of a more liberal tradition have long embraced a view of sexuality which is significantly at odds with official church statements. But that spectrum of opinion has spread beyond the bounds of extreme liberalism, becoming 'mainstream' in many parishes up and down the country, particularly those which have benefitted from the ministry (both lay and ordained) of LGB&T people.

2.3 Even among evangelicals perceptions are changing. The growth of groups like Accepting Evangelicals demonstrates this with over 450 members, many of whom are ordained ministers and pastors.

2.4 Research by Evangelical Alliance (2011) has shown that there is no longer universal support for a traditional line on same-sex relationships. In a survey of over 17,000 people from Evangelical Churches and Festivals - eg Spring Harvest, Keswick, New Wine - 27% of respondents who identified themselves as evangelical Christians declined to agree with the statement "I believe that homosexual actions are always wrong". Nor was this as a result of rejection of the traditional emphasis on Scripture as 94% of the same sample group agreed with the statement: "The Bible has supreme authority in guiding my beliefs, views and behaviour."

2.5 Similarly, theologians elsewhere like Presbyterian Jack Rogers (former Fellow at Fuller Seminary and Professor of Theology Emeritus at San Francisco Theological Seminary) have changed their minds on sexuality after prolonged engagement with both pastoral experience and Scripture. In his book "Jesus, the Bible and Homosexuality" (WJK, 2009) he outlines his own change of mind and a belief that the Bible has been misused to justify a conservative theology of sexuality – just as historically, it has been used to justify slavery and oppression of women.

2.6 Yet such diversity of thought and belief are constantly played down in church policy statements. Even in the quoting of Lambeth 1.10, the line about incompatibility with scripture is often repeated while other statements are either played down or ignored. For example, Lambeth 1.10 also states:

"We must confess that we are not of one mind about homosexuality... we have prayed, studied and discussed these issues, and we are unable to reach a common mind on the scriptural, theological, historical, and scientific questions which are raised. There is much that we do not yet understand."

2.7 We believe therefore that the first priority of the review group should be to recognise and express adequately the diversity of opinion that exists in the Church of England.

3.0 Effect of Church Teaching on LGB&T Christians

3.1 The impact which church teaching has on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Christians is both profound and disturbing. Particularly in evangelical churches, LGB&T Christians often feel marginalised and alienated within church, and many have chosen to leave rather than face the continuing corrosive pressure on their faith. We know of others who have been refused Communion or permission to join a homegroup. Still others have been told that they are welcome but that they can play no active part in ministry or leadership – even to the extent of being taken off rotas for bible readings and intercessions when their sexuality became known. If they stay, they find themselves forced to live in a kind of conditional silenced membership tolerated only as long as they don't speak of their sexuality or partnership.

3.2 The 'call to repentance' which statements like the recent St Matthias Day Statement from CEEC may only serve to add to the feelings of guilt and confusion. Many have told us of the tension of feeling God's love and acceptance in prayer, and yet also feeling unable to receive that love because of what they are being taught in church.

3.3 This leads many to a profound sense of loneliness and despair which can in some cases contribute to thoughts of suicide. This is further exacerbated by church teaching conveying a 'right to judge' on church members when it comes to sexuality. All too often LGB&T Christians are not offered the Gospel of John 3:16 or Romans 1:16&17, but rather the condemnation of Leviticus 18 or Romans 1:26&27. Overall, we are in danger of betraying the good news of the Gospel in apparent zeal for maintaining current teaching on sexuality.

3.4 This cycle of alienation and fear also extends to the families of LGB&T Christians and we know of many parents who have stopped attending their church because of the way their son or daughter has been treated after 'coming out' – or indeed the way they have been treated once their son or daughter's sexuality has become known.

3.5 All this has continued unabated despite some engagement in the Listening Process (which has been patchy at best) and we believe that this will continue to be the case until the church is ready to recognise and embrace a variety of Christian teaching on same-sex relationships which allows Christians to make their own mind up while not judging those who decide differently.

4.0 Effect of Church Teaching on Mission

4.1 The current impasse is also having a grave effect on mission and evangelism in the wider community. Anecdotal evidence in the UK points to increasing incredulity among young people in particular at the church's stance. One of our members who is ordained was told by her teenage son recently that 'I will start listening to your church when your church stops condemning my friends.' He is not gay but felt very strongly on behalf of school friends who are.

4.2 Elsewhere in the world, the statistical research speaks for itself.

- In the USA research by the Public Religion Research Institute in 2011 revealed that almost 70% of under 30's say religious groups are alienating them by being too judgmental about homosexuality.
- In Australia research on evangelism by Olive Tree Media in 2011 (an evangelical organisation) showed that 69% of non-Christians polled said that church doctrine on homosexuality is a 'belief blocker' for them. The only issue which was a greater hurdle to faith was the issue of abuse of children in churches.

4.3 In the western world which has largely accepted the validity of same-sex relationships, the Church is increasingly alienating those who we are called to reach out to – both homosexual and heterosexual. Our message of the love of God, made manifest in Jesus Christ is being undermined by our intransigence on sexuality.

5.0 Civil Partnerships:

5.1 The growth of Civil Partnerships in the UK since 2005 has exceeded expectations. More than 47,000 Civil Partnerships has been registered by the end of 2010 which is more than double the estimates made in 2005.

5.2 Most enter into Civil Partnerships, not just for the legal protection which it offers but as an expression of love and commitment to one another. Indeed many call this 'marriage' and that is how it is perceived by the majority of ordinary people despite legal and theological distinctions. As we know significant numbers of clergy have entered into Civil Partnerships despite the complications which such a public statement can evoke in their Diocese, and the negative effect which it can have on their future prospects.

5.3 The Church of England's current position of not allowing formal services of Blessing, but allowing 'pastoral responses' is creating both confusion and resentment. We believe that this increased take-up of Civil Partnerships only increases the importance of adopting a more affirmative stance towards Civil Partnerships for the sake of pastoral mission.

5.4 As a result we would join with others in calling for an experimental liturgy of 'Thanksgiving and Dedication after Civil Partnership' to be developed and authorised. We believe that with careful wording this could be done without contravening the moratorium on same-sex blessings which is currently in force across the Anglican Communion and would create a valuable pastoral resource both for clergy and for couples seeking to celebrate their Civil Partnership in church.

6.0 Same-sex Marriage:

6.1 In relation to calls for same-sex marriage, we have discussed the issue at length, and consulted our members in coming to a view on this most contentious of current issues.

6.2 In the course of our discussions it has become clear that there is a wide variety of views which need further prayerful reflection and study. Accordingly, we have produced the following position statement on same-sex marriage and offer it to the review group as a way of taking this conversation forward.

In recognition of the variety of opinion on same-sex marriage which exists among members of Accepting Evangelicals and the lack of theological reflection in the Church on this issue:

- Accepting Evangelicals is committed to encouraging theological discussion and prayerful reflection on the nature and historical development of marriage in relation to growing calls for marriage to be extended to include same-sex couples.
- We believe there needs to be a broader understanding of the importance of marriage and civil partnership in society; and also a greater understanding of the Biblical roots of covenant commitments.
- We observe that to society in general, where two people who love each other make a formal commitment, whatever name we might give it, that commitment is seen as “marriage”; therefore the positive nature of that commitment should be acknowledged in our discussion.
- We will seek to promote this discussion in a way which will enable mutual growth and understanding among all Christians, initially with those who take an affirming or accepting view of same-sex relationships.
- We also call on the wider church to engage in this process of theological reflection and express deep concern about some of the claims that have been made by those opposed to such a change.
- We believe that there needs to be a time of stepping back from polarised debate and listening to each other with mutual respect in order to achieve some level of reconciliation.

7.0 Conclusions:

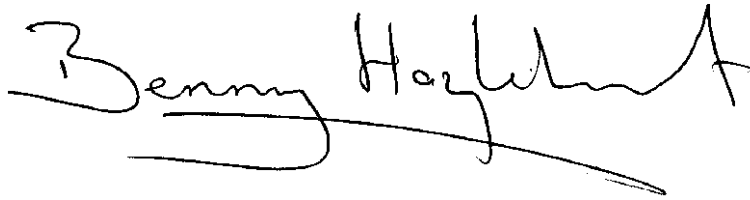
7.1 As the review group takes forward its work, we would express the following hopes and aspirations:

- a) That the Church of England begins to formally recognise and express the diversity of opinions and theological understandings that exist in the Church of England.
- b) That for the sake of LGB&T Christians and our mission to society at large, the Church moves beyond the Listening Process to positive engagement with more inclusive theologies of sexuality which seek to emphasise the value of committed faithful partnerships.
- c) That the Church of England begins to develop an experimental liturgy of ‘Thanksgiving and Dedication after Civil Partnership’ to be available to churches as a formal response to requests for Blessing of Civil Partnerships.

d) That the Church will engage in encouraging theological discussion and prayerful reflection on the nature and historical development of marriage in relation to growing calls for marriage to be extended to include same-sex couples.

7.2 We would value to opportunity to meet with the Review Group and explore these areas further, and pray for every blessing on you as you carry out this challenging task.

Yours in Christ

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Benny Hazlehurst". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke underneath the name.

Rev Benny Hazlehurst

Secretary, Accepting Evangelicals

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