

**To:** The members of the General Synod of the Church of England

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

This letter comes to you, dear members of General Synod, from us, the members of the Pastoral Advisory Group. We want to tell you about our work in a way that signals our desire to generate trust and vulnerability among us as we reflect together on some of the implications of the tasks we have been given.

We are drawn from different parts of the church and bring different personal experiences of faith and life to bear. We are extremely aware that we are not ‘representative’ of every aspect of human experience as regards gender and sexual orientation and we make no claim to speak ‘for’ others. However, our engagement with our task has put us into contact with many people from LGBTI+ communities, in addition to those members of the Group who consider themselves to be part of these communities.

A key task with which we have been entrusted is to produce pastoral resources ‘consistent with [the] current doctrine and ecclesiastical laws of the Church of England’. In producing the Pastoral Principles we have become highly sensitized to the fact that in offering almost any resources we could be accused of seeking to affect teaching and doctrine. It is for this reason, therefore, that the Group does not intend to venture into the realm of offering guidelines and resources for public prayer. Responsibility for this, correctly, lies elsewhere in the Church.

This has been a difficult realization for us, because people *are* making pastoral requests for prayer – we have clearly heard this. Prayer means standing alongside people in often complex and sometimes impossible situations and offering our concern for them to God. It is inherently costly and risky and utterly in line with the ministry of Jesus.

We would now like to turn to what we believe we *can* confidently offer, which is a proposed diagnosis of those things that are a bar to good pastoral practice in the Church. We believe that acting on this diagnosis could be potentially transformative for the Church. Our hope is that the Pastoral Principles will help shape the life of the Church in such a way that when the time comes to discern a way forward, the Church can do so together, unimpeded by defensive and adversarial impulses.

We have identified what could be called ‘six pervading evils’: ignorance, silence, fear, hypocrisy, misused power and prejudice, and we would like to offer them to you now for discussion:

Can it be right that some with pastoral responsibility in the church are so often ignorant of what it is like to be LGBTI+? The foundation of all good pastoral care is understanding and knowledge.

**Ignorance** is unacceptable and can be addressed.

Can it be right for our church communities to have a policy (whether conscious or subconscious) of **silence** about matters relating to sexuality and gender? As we have learned increasingly in the area of safeguarding, silence can shelter abuses of power. People must speak and be allowed to speak – so that those who are vulnerable can hear and thus not feel that they are alone. Good pastoral ministry among LGBTI+ people can never happen in an environment where their presence or questions are intentionally ignored by those in church leadership. This will be perceived as putting their own reputational concerns before the needs of their people. If our church really believes that it

wishes to welcome everyone, no matter their personal circumstances, then this welcome must be clearly voiced.

Can it be right that anyone lives in **fear** of one another in our churches? Our observation is that many are living in that kind of fear among us today. There is fear in the clergy of how they may be held to account as they attempt to care in the light of their theological convictions. There is fear that a bishop's known views on a matter will colour her or his engagement with their people. There is fear that if one's personal circumstances or beliefs are known then one will be deprived of home or office. There is fear about 'breaking ranks' and speaking out. Whatever the causes, this kind of fear must be challenged: it corrupts our common life and imprisons individuals. It cannot be right that such fear is one of the biggest determining factors in church life today.

Can it be right that there are situations where people who might wish to be open about their sexual orientation feel forced to dissemble, or where parishes find themselves evading issues of sexuality? This can lead to a place where the Church is – with some justification – accused of fostering a climate of **hypocrisy**. Jesus clearly calls out hypocrisy. How can we become a church community that is appropriately open about matters of sexuality, gender and relationships?

Can it be right that pastoral encounters still take place without awareness of disparities of **power**? Inequalities of power have led to abuses in the past and will continue to do so unless all who exercise pastoral care reflect continuously on the power that they hold. Power must always be acknowledged and care exercised with the greatest awareness possible.

Can it be right that anyone fails to explore her or his own prejudices? No-one is unconditioned by their experience of life, positively or negatively. All of us must reflect deeply on our attitudes and our behaviour. All are loved children of God. The cross of Christ is for all. But the journey from **prejudice** to hatred is a short one, as so much online commentary sadly shows.

These are, we believe, 'six pervading evils' that our reflection on the experience of LGBTI+ people has led us to explore. Indeed, the experience of LGBTI+ people has been a lens that has focused them for us, and as such is a gift (if a bittersweet one) from the LGBTI+ community to the Church as a whole. We believe that if we are able to receive this gift, and to address these evils through Principles that apply to the whole Church as well as to LGBTI+ people, then we will be able to establish a transformative ethic around which people of different theological perspectives might cohere.

This ethic will not resolve the theological issues that relate to questions such as same sex marriage or gender identity, but we hope that it will help us to stand on an extended common ground from which we might then resolve these issues, because it will place us in a better relationship with each other and with all God's children, knowing that we are held together in the love of Christ.

This letter comes with joy in the faith that we share and strengthened by our trust and hope in Christ,

The members of the Pastoral Advisory Group

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