

Steven Croft



Together in Love and Faith

Personal Reflections and Next Steps for the Church

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Introduction

In November 2020, the Church of England published a comprehensive set of resources on the theme of human sexuality: Living in Love and Faith (LLF). These resources, bringing together diverse expertise, conviction and experience, are published on behalf of the House of Bishops and are commended to the Church for careful study and reflection. They include an accessible and substantial core book (*Living in Love & Faith: Christian teaching and learning about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage*), a five-session course guide for small groups, and a series of videos and podcasts. All of the resources are available at [churchofengland.org/llf](https://www.churchofengland.org/llf)

The bishops called upon the whole Church of England to enter into a process of reflection, learning and discernment. Collectively we made an appeal for careful consideration of the questions raised:

“This work demands from us that together we face our differences, divisions and disagreements honestly, humbly and compassionately, and that together we stand against homophobia, transphobia and all other unacceptable forms of behaviour, including demeaning those whose views are different from our own.” (*Living in Love & Faith*, p.420)

That process of churchwide engagement took place during 2021 and the first half of 2022, extended because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The outcomes of the formal consultation have now been published: on 1 September 2022, the Church of England published *Listening with Love and Faith*, which gathered together responses, and also a reflective essay: *Friendship & the Body of Christ*.¹ These publications, now part of the LLF resources, are intended to inform the next stage of the process, which is discernment about possible change in the Church of England’s practice.

The LLF resources deliberately do not draw conclusions about ways forward for the Church, but the next stage of the journey *will* seek to draw such conclusions and, in time, test the mind of the Church on possible changes to our pastoral and liturgical practice.

Most of the comments in *Listening with Love and Faith* that were on the theme of same-sex relationships and marriage expressed the hope that the LLF course might contribute to the acceptance of same-sex marriage or blessings of

same-sex partnerships (p.76). A small number presented the opposing view and spoke against such a change of doctrine. There was a strong appeal for bishops to lead the next part of the conversation (p.87).

This essay is offered as my own contribution to this next stage and process of discernment. I have not attempted to argue for conclusions on the whole range of issues covered in LLF. I have not engaged at all with questions of transgender identity and practice, or intersex, or a wide range of other matters. I acknowledge that these questions are key and painful for many people and that they do need to be addressed. I have focused on what seems to me to be the most pressing question requiring resolution: the Church of England's response to same-sex relationships, whether civil partnerships or marriage. Having listened to the debate around this question for many years, I put forward proposals for the next steps on this journey, as a contribution to the thinking of the Next Steps group, my fellow bishops and the wider Church.

I write, deliberately, as a bishop. As LLF acknowledges, the current bishops of the Church of England take different views on the question of same-sex relationships. While those who hold to the traditional understanding of the Church have been willing to speak out and defend their views, there are not many examples of bishops who advocate for change having set out either their proposals or the rationale for them. This can give the inaccurate impression of a House of Bishops that is uniformly conservative.

I write, deliberately, as someone who has changed their mind on these issues, very slowly (with hindsight too slowly) moving from a position where I found it difficult to accept the blessing of same-sex partnerships and marriage, to one where I believe the Church should embrace and bless these unions. This perspective will, I hope, make what is written helpful and relevant to others who are on a similar journey.

I need to acknowledge, right at the beginning of this essay, the acute pain and distress of LGBTQ+ people in the life of the Church. I am sorry that, corporately, we have been so slow as a Church to reach better decisions and practice on these matters. I am sorry that my own views were slow to change and that my actions, and lack of action, have caused genuine hurt, disagreement and pain. I remain on a very steep learning curve. Listening to this pain and distress has been key in my own journey and to the changes in my own views.

This contribution to the debate is offered hesitantly. It is a perspective from a white, male, heterosexual, episcopal, sixty-something-year-old, about a

complex set of issues on which the wisdom of the whole Church is needed and has been sought. I'm conscious that the views expressed here may cause further hurt. I'm very grateful to those who have read and challenged earlier versions of the text.

I make no claims to great originality or expertise in what follows. I recognise that people hold different positions in this debate and many will disagree with what I have written, in whole or in part. That is as it needs to be. In the final sections, I confirm my affection and respect for those who will want to argue, in good conscience, against change and potential provision for such change. I also make no claim whatsoever to infallibility: I may be wrong, either in the detail or in the overall argument. However, the Church will only be led into true and accurate discernment as we each, honestly and faithfully, share the best perspective we can, and subject those views to the wisdom of whole Church.

Wherever you are in your reflection on these issues, may God bless you in this journey and bless the whole Church in our discernment.

+Steven Oxford

October 2022

Part 1: My journey

At the time of writing, I've been a diocesan bishop in the Church for more than 13 years, in Sheffield and Oxford. It may help to know the influences that have shaped my understanding.

I became a Christian in my teens, through the local church in Halifax where I also went to school. I read classics and theology at Oxford and trained for the ministry at Cranmer Hall in Durham, concurrent with reading for a doctorate on the Psalms.

I was ordained in 1983 and served 13 years in parish ministry in Enfield and in my hometown of Halifax, where for nine years I was the vicar of a large church, on an outer estate, in the charismatic evangelical tradition. I have a lifelong commitment to mission and evangelism. I'm passionate about the Church rediscovering how to teach the faith well to enquirers and new Christians, and most of my writing has been in this area. I've been married to Ann for more than 40 years and we have four children and seven grandchildren.

In the mid 1990s, I returned to Cranmer Hall, as Warden, leading a community of around 100 staff and students preparing for Anglican and Methodist ministry. I inherited a staff team divided on the issues of human sexuality. The college had recently been 'blacklisted' by conservative evangelical groups in the Church, because of the views of some of the staff on the issues. My colleagues had published books taking opposite sides in the debate². Opinion was divided among the student body. Every year I would oversee a fortnight of sensitive-theme teaching, in which college staff helped ordinands think through various issues around sex and gender. Most years I would have pastoral conversations with students wrestling with these issues in their own lives and ministries.

After eight years in Durham, I was asked by Rowan Williams, then Archbishop of Canterbury, to set up and lead a new initiative for the Church of England, around planting new forms of church: Fresh Expressions. For five years I travelled the country focused on learning lessons around this kind of mission, building a team, and generally trying to keep my head down when it came to questions of human sexuality. The divisions were sharp across the Anglican communion at the time (not least in the Diocese of Oxford where I now serve).

Bishop of Sheffield, the Pilling Report and Shared Conversations

In 2008, the invitation came to be Bishop of Sheffield. My appointment was announced to a gathering of around 50 people at Sheffield Cathedral, with local press and television present. I introduced myself by attaching an L plate to the wall to stress how much I had to learn (it fell off, bringing some of the paintwork with it, which was not the best of starts). Then came the opportunity for questions. The very first one asked about my views on human sexuality.

Sheffield was then, and is now, a radical, secular city (and a great place to live). The diocese has a broad spread of views among its clergy, but with real strength among traditional Catholics (opposed to the ordination of women and largely conservative on matters of sexuality) and evangelicals. There are significant numbers of conservative evangelicals and charismatics (the latter group being more positive towards the ordination and leadership of women). I already knew that the diocese needed to address a large number of issues around mission and change, and to somehow hold together through the sharp debates to come.

I answered the question truthfully but briefly. I described my views as orthodox and generous to those who took a different view. This had been my own position for some time, combined with a wariness about being drawn into a wider debate. I held the view largely because of my commitment to the Scriptures and the priority of Scripture. But I was already finding (and would find increasingly) a tension between my commitment to this interpretation of Scripture and my vocation as a priest and pastor and evangelist.

All bishops take some share in the life of the national Church, normally through carrying a portfolio. A year into my time in Sheffield, I was asked to be one of two bishops elected to serve on the Archbishops' Council, the trustee body of the Church of England. In 2013, I took up the Chair of the Ministry Council, responsible for policy on selection, training and support for Anglican clergy and lay ministers. The bishop responsible for ministry tends to pick up other sensitive portfolios.

Around 2013, a small commission, chaired by Sir Joseph Pilling, brought a report back to the bishops and the Synod on human sexuality. It was the first sustained work on this topic by the Church of England for a decade. The report could not be unanimous, but the substantial recommendation was for a series of regional Shared Conversations, lasting several years, to raise levels of mutual understanding. These were professionally facilitated. I found myself chairing the small oversight group responsible for the Shared Conversations and, over

several years, answering sharp questions in the General Synod on these and related issues. In a period when energies were focused on legislation to enable women to be ordained as bishops, the Shared Conversations had the effect of helping the Church to mark time on potentially divisive sexuality issues and give the new Archbishop of Canterbury time and space to win the trust of the wider Anglican Communion.

At the same time, the government held a consultation on same-sex marriage. The Church of England submitted a response to the consultation, and I found myself, at short notice, on television defending what we had said (not terribly well). When same-sex marriages were introduced, I became one of a group of three bishops who acted as a reference group for other bishops when different pastoral situations arose.

All in all, the questions about how to respond to LGBTQ+ people were occupying more time and energy. I listened carefully to all that was being said. I read as widely as I could on the issues. I benefitted greatly from hospitality and contact with LGBTQ+ people in two ways: meetings to discuss the issues and their personal experiences were very helpful. More powerful was simple friendship and collegiality – working together over time on a whole range of projects and issues. My national roles meant that it was inappropriate for me to speak out on the issues (or so I argued to myself). It was of course much more comfortable for me to remain silent. That silence was, to some extent, a way of holding views across the Diocese of Sheffield together, when we were so divided on other issues.

Over time, I became less and less comfortable with the position I had summarised in 2008 as “orthodox and generous”. Slowly but surely, I experienced a change of heart and mind. I came to hold, and then wanted the Church of England to hold, a much more positive and affirming view of faithful same-sex partnerships, including offering services of blessing. I wanted the Church to offer much greater freedom of conscience to clergy, as well as lay people, to order their lives as they saw fit within those partnerships, including the freedom to be sexually active. I wanted the Church to offer clergy and ordinands the freedom to marry same-sex partners and still remain in good standing with the Church.

I found myself in much greater empathy with LGBTQ+ people in the debates than with those who were resisting change. I found myself putting forward arguments for change in various meetings of bishops and others, tentatively at first and then with greater confidence.

Bishop of Oxford and Living in Love and Faith

At that point in the story, as the national Shared Conversations were coming to an end, the invitation came, in 2016, to move diocese and to take up the role of Bishop of Oxford.

The invitation to move was both costly and welcome. Costly because we felt we had put down deep roots and invested in Sheffield, and I loved South Yorkshire. The diocese went on a difficult journey in appointing my successor after we moved (for which I felt partly responsible). Welcome because I enjoy change and fresh challenges, and Oxford is a large and fascinating diocese. It remains an awesome and mysterious thing to receive a call from God in later life, just as much as when you are young or middle-aged.

Oxford had also been a diocese stretched and divided on questions of human sexuality, with a challenging recent history. Many of the main players in the national debates seemed to have some connection with the diocese. One of the key challenges has been to discern how to help the diocese both hold together and navigate the coming debates, particularly given my own change of view.

I began with a resolution to be honest about my own views when asked. All bishops are asked to produce paperwork as part of the nominations process. In my submission to the Oxford Diocese I had written this:

“My own growing conviction, arising from careful study of Scripture, tradition and experience, is that the Church of England will need to extend greater liberty of conscience to its clergy on these matters in any future settlement (with corresponding safeguards of conscience for those who cannot themselves accept this).”

The subject didn't come up at interview. To my surprise it wasn't a major feature of my introductory series of meetings across 29 deaneries and the parallel series of meetings with clergy chapters. But I was asked, and shared, my changing views in personal conversations with those on all sides of the debate.

In February 2017, five months into my time in Oxford, I took part in work that led to a report to the General Synod that arose out of the Shared Conversations: *Marriage and Same-Sex Relationships after the Shared Conversations* (General Synod, 2055). The report attempted to present a consensus among the bishops for very little change, further theological study, and greater listening and pastoral engagement. The report caused a great deal of pain to LGBTQ+ people

and a painful division between the House of Bishops and the two other Houses of the Synod. After a vigorous campaign, the General Synod refused to take note of the report. One of the chief points of critique was the accusation of uniformity among the bishops: those who wanted to be advocates for change in effect allowed their voices to be subordinate to the majority view, in the interests of unity. I was complicit in this. I am sorry I did not speak out more clearly at the time and was grateful to those who did.

The national response of the Archbishops was to call for: “a radical new Christian inclusion in the Church. This must be founded in Scripture, in reason, in tradition, in theology and the Christian faith as the Church of England has received it; it must be based on good, healthy, flourishing relationships, and in a proper 21st-century understanding of being human and of being sexual.”

The Archbishops then established two working groups, one to establish some pastoral principles and the second to engage in a three-year study project, developing learning and teaching resources on marriage and human sexuality under the title *Living in Love & Faith*, published in 2020.

Locally, in consultation with colleagues, I set up an advisory group of LGBTQ+ people to advise on ways forward, and I met separately with those opposed to any change. It became clear from these conversations, and separate engagement with senior colleagues, that we needed to make a local response to the national events and process. Following the example of the Diocese of Lichfield, in October 2017 we published a pastoral letter to the diocese: *Clothe Yourselves with Love*.³

The letter was, and remains, a pastoral response to the situation the Church finds itself in at present. Its title and content arose directly from our sense of call as a diocese to become a more Christ-like Church, for the sake of God’s world: more contemplative, more compassionate and more courageous. The title and theological content were drawn from a key passage in Colossians:

“Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” (3:14)

The main aim of the letter was to encourage welcome and support for LGBTQ+ people and their families, through commending the four principles advocated by the Lichfield bishops. As a diocese, we undertook to continue to uphold the Church of England’s policies on human sexuality and to continue to listen to all

sides in the debate. We offered supportive conversations with those responding to requests for prayers with same-sex couples. We undertook to develop a chaplaincy to and for LGBTQ+ people and their families, which was eventually launched in February 2020.

The letter was broadly, though not universally, welcomed within and beyond the diocese. Some felt it did not go far enough and sought something more radical. A large group of evangelical clergy published a joint letter of concern, courteously expressing dissent from what we had written. We responded, setting out our commitment to continue to listen to all parties in the debate and a commitment to the place of evangelicals in the ongoing life of the Church of England. There has been a vigorous and courteous correspondence and dialogue with different groups, almost continuously since publication.

Over the last two years, the national listening and dialogue has continued, but less publicly. Although I have not been involved in any of the working groups, I have contributed to the LLF process as best I can. I have argued consistently that the process should aim to reach clear theological and pastoral conclusions that would enable at least some parts of the Church of England to recognise and bless same-sex relationships in the coming years.

The Oxford bishops' pastoral letter has been read (and critiqued) as a theological statement of my own views and those of my colleagues, but it was not intended as a theological argument. At various points I have reflected on how and whether to set out my own position more fully. It seemed premature to do this before the LLF resources were published and the process reached the present moment of discernment. I've continued to listen to the arguments LLF has developed and have learned a great deal through engaging with the material and with the many conversations both in the House and College of Bishops and, more recently, within our own diocese.

Some within my own diocese have advised against my setting out my own views more fully, particularly as I am advocating a change in the present position of the Church. Some have argued that the only way to do this with integrity would be to resign my office first, since as a bishop it is my responsibility to uphold Christian doctrine. I respect this view and those who hold it, but dissent from it because I believe this subject is of such importance for the whole life and mission of the Church. One of the things I have found most irritating over the years has been when bishops and other senior figures in the Church make clear their views only after they have retired.

I make no claim to special wisdom, still less to infallibility. I may be wrong in the views I hold. Nevertheless it seems important to set them out as clearly as possible at this point in the debate as a single contribution from a particular perspective. They are the fruit of a great deal of listening and reflection on the issue. The feedback from the LLF process indicates that many people in the Church of England want to know what their bishops think on these key issues and the reasons behind that thinking (even if they disagree with the conclusions). The Church of England has been exploring questions of human sexuality continuously for over a decade. We do now need to move towards a resolution.

Part 2: The case for change

The journey I have taken as an evangelical bishop to a more affirming position on same-sex relationships seems potentially relevant. A significant number of current bishops in the Church of England are evangelical. Many remain resistant to change or undecided, as do other clergy nurtured in this tradition, who often lead larger churches or are part of substantial and influential networks. As an evangelical, I retain a high view of the authority of Scripture. How then is it possible to be an advocate for change?

I will do my best to set out my position in the following pages, in the hope that it may be helpful to others. I am writing primarily for those who, like me, are genuinely perplexed about a helpful and constructive way forward for the Church in the present times. My prayer is that such wisdom as I can offer will serve as a complementary voice to the depth of resource available in *Living in Love and Faith* (LLF), and elsewhere, and serve as a guide to others in the Diocese of Oxford and beyond.

I've done my best to set out a theological argument for change, in what I hope is a logical and coherent order. It's not easy to summarise what is in effect more than 20 years' consideration of these matters in the context of reflecting on the mission of the Church. What follows is not a complete statement of my views, nor is it the only way of setting out the case.

I begin with some reflections on the hurt and pain resulting from the Church of England's present position and on what seems to me to be at stake in this debate. I explore briefly the fruits and benefits of same-sex partnerships, as I have observed them, and what would be the fruits and benefits of a change of position by the Church.

Next, I explore the ways in which our culture views the Church, because of our present position. I go on to take the question of blessing same-sex relationships, marriage and other changes to our interpretation of Scripture. Finally, I suggest some practical ways forward, both for making the changes and for enabling people who hold different views also to continue to hold together as a single Church.

1. Listening to the pain

In the summer of 2014, the Christian worship leader Vicky Beeching was interviewed in depth by *The Independent* newspaper on her experiences as a gay, Christian woman in an evangelical context – a context that was very familiar to me. Vicky later wrote in more depth about her journey, in her book *Undivided: Coming out, becoming whole, and living free from shame* (Harper Collins, 2018). I found the original interview and the book deeply moving. Her interview brought together for me things I had read and conversations I had had with LGBTQ+ people over a number of years, and it helped me understand even more the genuine damage done to many Christians through the Church's current attitudes to human sexuality.

This damage includes, variously, a sense of hurt and rejection, physical illness, depression, and alienation from the life of the Church. It includes the setting of (what I now think to be) false choices between following Christ and owning one's sexuality, and also between a sense of God's vocation, where there is a calling to ordained ministry, and the possibility of an active same-sex partnership. The damage is experienced acutely by those who are younger, who have grown up in a very different world from my own contemporaries. There is deep hurt and distress among those who have endured this sense of rejection and unworthiness at the hands of their own Church for the whole of their lives, even as they have found a much greater degree of acceptance and affirmation in our wider society. Many, of course, have given up on the Church at different points in their lives because of their accumulated distress. For some, there are all too tragic and heartrending consequences. In September 2014, 14-year-old schoolgirl Lizzie Lowe took her own life because she could not reconcile being Christian and gay.⁴

I had heard similar accounts previously, but the combination of the Shared Conversations and these high-profile stories opened my eyes and ears to the extent of the hurt people experienced and helped me to be a more attentive listener. I was able to find ways to listen better to lay people and clergy, in Sheffield and then in Oxford, and appreciate something more of the pain of their journeys.⁵ I became more alert to the pain experienced by Christian parents, including clergy – who saw their LGBTQ+ adult children increasingly alienated from the Church and the faith to which they had devoted their lives – because of attitudes that are slow to change.

Why was it so hard to hear the extent of the pain and distress of my fellow Christians? It seems important to examine this question, not to make excuses

for myself or others for not hearing this more clearly much earlier – but because others will be making a similar journey. It is very difficult as a Church leader to acknowledge pain, and discomfort within your own community – especially if you are the cause of that pain or see it as a challenge to deeply held beliefs.

It is much too easy to dismiss the experiences of a small number of individuals as particular to them. The value of the Church of England's Shared Conversations was that, for me at least, individual stories of pain, difficulty and rejection (evidenced in the recent films produced for the LLF project) accumulated until, as a pastor, I could no longer ignore them. I was moved to tears that those who were entitled to expect love and support from the Church experienced rejection, harsh words and, in some circumstances, intentional cruelty. I was, and remain, sorry and regretful that I didn't listen harder and act sooner.

Increased pain, as Church and society have diverged

The experience of LGBTQ+ Christians within the Church has undoubtedly become even more difficult as conditions and rights for LGBTQ+ people within our wider society have improved. In the 1980s, attitudes within Church and society remained convergent in terms of law and social policy. In the 1990s, they started to diverge and the Church began to be seriously out of step with wider social attitudes. This changed again in the 2000s with the advent of civil partnerships, and again, most sharply, in 2014, with the introduction of equal marriage. Indeed, the Church of England could be accused of becoming more conservative in its public pronouncements: the statement on opposite-sex civil partnerships, published in January 2020, was considerably more reticent about sex outside of marriage than the House of Bishops' 1991 document, *Issues in Human Sexuality*.⁶

For LGBTQ+ Christians, this divergence between Church and society creates a context of acute pain and alienation from the community in which they might be entitled most to expect love, understanding, acceptance and respect.

This gap between Church and society is not felt in the same way, of course, by every LGBTQ+ person. In larger and more conservative churches there will sometimes be a mutually supportive group of same-sex attracted young adults who have made the demanding decision to be celibate, out of respect for Scripture and a desire to live out the radical call of Christ in this way. Sometimes these networks flourish among clergy and church workers across wide geographical areas. Such a group will draw strength from the challenge of living in a countercultural way and will depend to a high degree on the support and friendships of their church and those around them. I spent a very valuable

and moving evening with one such group in 2020. This group experienced a different kind of pain, to which they felt I was contributing: a fear that the Church was abandoning its traditional position on same-sex relationships and thus undermining the lifestyle they were living out with honesty and integrity and at very considerable cost.

But with each generation, as the disjunction between Church and society grows, the pain and difficulty for younger LGBTQ+ people grows sharper. The alienation felt by parents, family and friends, and their impatience with the Church, also grows. This, in turn, is leading to a radical dislocation between the Church of England and the culture and society we are attempting to serve. As the Church of England, our hope and prayer is to serve the whole of the community. Everyone who lives in a parish has, historically, had the right to be married and to be baptised in their parish church. We seek to serve everyone, whatever their own beliefs. This ability to serve and to be accepted in every place is now being deeply affected by the disjunction between the Church's historic teaching on same-sex partnerships and the rapid change in our culture and the legal frameworks for marriage.

The pain of navigating church if you are LGBTQ+

The Church is not currently offering an official, unequivocal, positive encouragement to faithful, stable same-sex relationships. We are not able to commend formally such relationships to the generations growing up, who understand from an early age that they are gay. What are the alternatives?

The Church commends a single and celibate lifestyle. Some, because of their devotion to Christ and the close support of family and friends and churches, are able to receive this call and live it out, but many are not.

Some have denied their own sexuality and have entered into opposite sex marriages. For some, who are bisexual, this has genuinely been a pathway to fruitful marriages and to parenthood, for which thanks be to God. For others, sadly, these relationships do not stand the test of time. At some point the lesbian or gay-male partner breaks away from the marriage. This will often cause a very high degree of pain (although I have known situations that have been navigated with love, respect and integrity).

Still others choose, by default, a double life, but one in which committed belief in the Church's teaching has led to repressed and unacknowledged sexual urges that, ultimately finding expression, appear in the form of promiscuity, illness or excess (to the detriment of the individual's and others' lives).

Another way is a reluctant single life, lived broadly within the Church's guidelines and disciplines, but in which the inability to enter into a committed, loving same-sex relationship manifests itself, variously (but unavoidably) in people as inner pain and loneliness, in breakdowns, in suicidal thoughts, tendencies and actions.

Except for the minority called to a fulfilled celibacy, none of these alternatives (understandably) commends itself to LGBTQ+ people growing up within the family of the Church. Instead, many find their way to a faithful partnership (or openness to that partnership) within the Church, living in dissent from the Church's teaching and in the hope that it will change. This includes many clergy. This path is never easy, but harder in some evangelical sections of the Church than in others. But many, and I suspect the majority, conclude that this manifestation of the Christian faith, or perhaps the Christian faith itself, is not for them and actively leave or passively drift from the life of the Church.

The pain of unsatisfactory pastoral relationships

The Church's reluctance to conduct prayers of blessing for same-sex relationships or to solemnise same-sex marriages and to legitimise them in the eyes of the Christian community undoubtedly has a detrimental effect on all kinds of pastoral relationships, both within congregations and within dioceses. Families may be reluctant to acknowledge or speak of the partnerships formed by their children. A married couple will be reluctant to seek advice if one of them has begun to wrestle with their sexuality. Clergy find it hard to acknowledge with their bishop the deepest relationships of their lives, because of uncertainty as to whether this can and will be received. We need to pay careful attention to the way in which the disjunction between Church and society is affecting our pastoral relationships of mutual support.

In the middle of 2019, I was duty bishop in the House of Lords during a debate on the amendment of the Civil Partnerships bill (to allow a man and a woman to contract a civil partnership). A Labour peer, Lord Falconer, proposed an amendment to encourage the Church of England to review its position on same-sex marriage. It was my task to respond through the debate.

This was a particular kind of public listening. My fellow peers spoke movingly and from personal experience about the value and stability and deep love in same-sex partnerships. Several also spoke of the abuse they regularly received when they spoke out on these issues, abuse which cut to the core of their own identity. Almost all were deeply critical of the Church of England's current stance. Their critique was based on moral and ethical argument.

I did my best to acknowledge and pay tribute to the honesty and pain expressed by my colleagues and underscored the Church of England's serious commitment to exploring these issues and moving forward constructively, pastorally and positively. The amendment was opposed by the government and not put to the vote, on the grounds that the Church has the power to amend its own practice and needs to make its own decisions. I was left in no doubt (again) of the growing disjunction between Church and society, the urgent need for change and the immense cost to the mission of the Church if there is no movement.⁷

2. Faithful, stable, long-term same-sex relationships

Several years ago, a priest came to talk with me about the reasons he intended to marry his same-sex civil partner. He was good enough to share with me the whole story of their relationship. He and I were about the same age. He had a distinguished ministry, although outside the parochial system.

The relationship between this priest and his partner, like hundreds of others, had been life changing and life transforming. It had enabled them both to exercise a variety of demanding professional and voluntary roles across every decade of their working lives. The partnership had been key to a fruitful and happy life. Like any long relationship it would no doubt have had its difficulties, but I was left in no doubt that this was a relationship that was deeply loving and caring, had brought great joy.

The conversation caused me to reflect very deeply on the similarities between this partnership and my own marriage. Ann and I met in our late teens, married in our very early twenties and have now been married more than 40 years. I know how infinitely precious this relationship and marriage to Ann is to me. I know how much love and joy has been shared over the years. I know that I could not have fulfilled the different callings on my life and ministry without Ann's continual love and support.

Yet the Church was saying to us that it could not bless or condone one of these lifelong, faithful and stable partnerships, and needed to fence it round (for clergy) with extra rules and conditions (including withholding permission for intimacy and permission to marry), despite the obvious, tested and clear fruitfulness of that relationship.

That painful and difficult piece of learning allowed other experiences of same-sex relationships to fall into place in my mind. I find myself impressed by partnerships that have endured decades, often into later life, and that continue, in the biblical metaphor, to bear fruit for good not only in the lives of the couple but in the lives of their wider families – in the work they do and in the life of the communities around them.

I am thankful, for example, for the welcome, hospitality and collegueship of two women, now in their seventies, partners for several decades and committed Christians, who served in different and senior lay capacities within the Diocese of Sheffield. They revealed (and reveal) to me something very powerful of the love and grace of Christ, not least because their relationship

has been tried and tested in the face of the indifference and hostility of the Church across several generations.

If these partnerships can bear fruit in these ways, despite the opposition and passive resistance of the Church to blessing and acknowledging them, then what fruit might be born among young people, in the present and in the future, were the Church of England's policy to change?

The Bible and the Christian tradition set great store by the test of fruitfulness. Jesus says at the end of the Sermon on the Mount:

“In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.” (Matthew 7:17-20)

This insight is worked through in various places within the Christian tradition of discernment about ethical questions. St Augustine of Hippo, bishop in North Africa in the 4th century, argues powerfully that the test of whether we are reading Scripture well is the increase of our love for God and for our neighbour. St Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order, also develops the idea of fruit as one key to discernment: does a chosen course of action lead to an increase of faith, hope and love in myself and in others?

The conclusion I have drawn, from all of my listening, is that we have a situation in which the present position of the Church of England, set as we are within our present social and missional context, is producing bad fruit. Conversely, the faithful and stable same-sex partnerships I observe seem to be producing good fruit for them and for our wider society. It seems to me that this provides a strong justification for revisiting Scripture and the tradition to see whether a change in our policies and attitudes to same-sex partnerships and marriage can be both justified and blessed.

3. Our culture's moral view of the Church's present policy

Before I take this question to the Scriptures, here are three deep questions I have heard asked repeatedly in debate, in our wider culture, about same-sex relationships and the position of the Church.

The nature and origin of sexual attraction

Is homosexual attraction a choice or a given? Is such attraction permanent or does it fluctuate and change? And what is the effect of the conclusion you reach on this question on the wider ethical questions around human behaviour?

The vast majority of our culture now believes that homosexual attraction is not chosen but given: something we are born with or that develops as we grow up. Scientists and doctors continue to debate this. *Living in Love and Faith* sets out the evidence for a genetic role in sexual identity and for the effect of culture and nurture. Most people would acknowledge a sense of mystery around human attraction still: it is hard to understand ourselves or other people fully. Most would acknowledge a spectrum of human sexual attraction and some degree of change in this, particularly in adolescence.

But for the purpose of the Church's navigation through the coming decades, it is as clear that we inhabit a broader culture in which attraction to a member of the same sex is believed to be not a matter of choice but genetic. This is the way that you are. It is not something that can be changed or mitigated.

Once this is acknowledged, the ethical equation fundamentally changes. If same-sex attraction is thought to be a matter of choice, then seeking intimate same-sex relationships requires a person to make moral and ethical decisions on a par with a heterosexual person pursuing a particular intimate relationship. In this world view, it is not offensive for the Church to put forward rules and guidelines, as a level playing field for everyone, for such important and personal relationships.

But if homosexual attraction is a given, not a matter of choice, then this playing field changes. If Church ethical guidelines forbid partnerships to one group of people but not to another, the prevailing culture regards this as unjust. The majority of heterosexual people are able to choose to be married or single within the Church's teaching (in accordance with their vocation and the people to whom they are attracted), but homosexuals are not and have a much more limited range of choices within Christian ethical teaching.

In paying attention to our prevailing culture, particularly as expressed by the under forties, I am aware of their sense of this manifest unfairness, and of anger and alienation among a whole generation. If the Church believes this clear injustice, the argument goes, then what does this say about the rest of the beliefs of the Church? Is this an organisation that is to be taken seriously at all as a moral and ethical force in the 21st century?

Over the last generation, this sense of justice and fairness has proved to be more than simply observation or a passing feature of a particular culture. Justice and fairness for LGBTQ+ people has become enshrined in anti-discrimination laws (with sexual orientation a protected characteristic), and in the opening up of both civil partnerships and marriage to partners of the same sex.

We, therefore, now have a profound dislocation between the Church of England – the established Church, aiming to serve the whole of our society – and the society we are called to serve. This dislocation is about more than an attitude to some forms of partnership or sexual expression, it is a fundamental disagreement about justice and fairness: we are seen to inhabit a different moral universe.

The next decade seems to me to be a cultural crossroads for Church and society, and the Church of England's own response to the question of same-sex partnerships and marriage is critical. There may still be time (just) for the fissure that has opened up to be healed, or at least for the healing to begin. But if we delay further, I fear the consequences for the future mission and life of the Church, for our relationship with the nation, and for the future course of the Christian faith in this country, will be severe.

We have a culture now in which homosexual orientation is viewed in a similar way to being left-handed. It is simply seen as a given. To discriminate against a section of the population on the grounds of a given characteristic (such as the colour of their skin or a disability or sexuality) is unlawful and is seen to be deeply wrong; a further reason to re-examine our Scriptures and the tradition to see if we can find a better way.

The goods of marriage

Here is a paradox. The more the Church commends the goods of permanent, stable and faithful relationships for heterosexual people in marriage, the more difficult it becomes to justify denying those goods and blessings to people who happen to be homosexual.

In classical Christian teaching, the goods of marriage are threefold (following Augustine). In the words of the most recent marriage service:

“Marriage is given that as man and woman grow together in love and trust, they shall be united with one another in heart, body and mind as Christ is united with his bride, the Church. The gift of marriage brings husband and wife together in the delight and tenderness of sexual union and joyful commitment to the end of their lives. It is given as the foundation of family life in which children are [born and] nurtured and in which each member of the family, in good times and in bad, may find strength, companionship and comfort and grow to maturity in love.”

Preface to The Marriage Service, Common Worship

Mutual love and support, sexual intimacy and the foundation of family life are undoubtedly good things. They are what make the costly and demanding vocation of Christian marriage worthwhile. The interrelationship between the three goods is important. Mutual society and comfort are enriched by intimacy and together provide a strong foundation for family life. Note that the marriage service does not restrict family life to the conception and birth of children: older heterosexual couples (and some younger ones) may marry and not be able to conceive, or choose not to do so. Couples find themselves as step-parents to children of previous marriages or by adoption or through fostering.

The more we emphasise and proclaim these goods, and there are excellent Scriptural reasons for doing so, the more sharply the question is raised within and outside the Church: So what exactly is the reason for attempting to withhold the goods of such partnerships from people who happen to be homosexual? Is it fair to say that the Church is “withholding the goods of marriage”? Perhaps not, since civil marriage for all is now an option. But the Church continues to withhold the public blessing of such unions from those who enter into them, denying them a Christian validity before family and friends.

Alongside this withholding of good things through our present practice, it is unclear to me what is the harm that (allegedly) flows from the blessing of same-sex unions or marriage. I can see harms that flow from general sexual promiscuity and from other forms of sexual exploitation and abuse (and these are explored in the following section). I can see harms that can come from a careless or hasty change of practice that doesn't pay due attention to the Scripture and the tradition. But I cannot see evidence of actual harms in

the lives of those who have entered into same-sex civil partnerships or civil marriage with the intention of forming permanent and stable lifelong unions: either to the people themselves or to our wider society. The opposite is the case. Even to raise the question feels improper in our present context.

The same as advocating promiscuity?

A small number of the letters I received following the publication of *Clothe Yourselves with Love* accused me of wanting to be an advocate for indiscriminate sexual promiscuity. This is, of course, not the case.

I will explore the question more fully in the discussion of biblical passages below. Here I simply want to make two things clear. The first is that, in my view, to advocate the blessing of same-sex partnerships or marriage is not the same as advocating sexual promiscuity. The second is that, in my experiences, our culture also understands the difference very clearly.

It is true that our culture takes different points of view on this, which are more or less restrictive on both heterosexual and homosexual promiscuity. In general terms, I find that the perspective of Christian teaching on marriage is listened to carefully as a contribution to this debate. Our culture agrees still, at a deep level, with the Christian tradition that the ways we express ourselves sexually are important for our life and well-being, and that sexual intimacy that is exploitative, careless or violent is wrong.

In order for the voice of the Church to be heard on these issues, people first need resolution on the fundamental issue of justice (identified in the previous two sections), which is of such huge importance to society at large and to many in the Church. It is possible to have a mutually respectful conversation between Church and society on, say, sex with robots or dating apps or teenage sexting or pornography. It is almost impossible to have a mutually respectful conversation between Church and society on the grounds of justice, if the Church denies the rights of homosexual people to enter into loving and faithful partnerships and marriage.

What is at stake goes beyond the well-being and flourishing of gay and lesbian people and trust that the Church is fair and just in its ethics. What is at stake is the ability of the Church to speak to UK culture on a wide range of sexual issues. There is a danger that we deny our culture the very benefit of the Christian tradition and wisdom on sexual relationships that is so dear to us.

4. What changes should we make?

The present position of the Church of England on same-sex relationships no longer seems appropriate. Change is needed.

So what pastoral accommodation and changes am I proposing? I hope it will be helpful to set these out here and then take them to the Scriptures rather than somehow argue them out of the exposition of particular texts. They are proposals that grow out of where our Church is at the present time, with its particular responsibilities to all of the people of England, to the Anglican Communion and as the Established Church of England.

As I have described above, the proposal brought forward by the House of Bishops in February 2017 did not command the support of the General Synod. That position was one of no change in essential doctrine and no liturgical blessings of same-sex unions, but maximum other accommodation, welcome and support. I do not think it is sustainable for the whole Church of England to maintain this position. However, I do believe that this historical position should continue to be accommodated within our polity and practices, and protected by conscience. I will say more on this below. I am not arguing for a dissolution of sexual ethics.

In the light of, now, ten years of reflection, through the Pilling Report, the Shared Conversations and the Living in Love and Faith process, I believe that we should take four very important steps:

1. Enable the provision of public services of blessing for same-sex civil partnerships and marriages.
2. Give freedom of conscience to clergy and ordinands to order their relationships appropriately.
3. Give freedom of conscience to clergy to enter into same-sex civil marriage.
4. Remove the legal barriers to the solemnisation of same-sex marriage in the Church of England.

Despite these years of exploration and study, the Church of England remains divided on the issue. Many ordinary Church members, many clergy and many bishops, want to see these changes happen. Others continue to oppose them on grounds of theological faithfulness to Scripture and in good conscience.

Therefore, if changes are to be made in these ways (and to enable them) we will also need to ensure:

5. The recognition that it remains a legitimate and honourable position within the Church of England to continue to hold to the traditional view of marriage and human sexuality.
6. Freedom of conscience to clergy and parishes not to opt in to the new possible arrangements for services of blessing and same-sex marriage.
7. Differentiation of provision and oversight for those clergy and parishes who believe that, in conscience, they need to distance themselves from the parts of the Church that welcome and affirm same-sex relationships.

In an earlier draft of this paper, I argued for a two-stage solution: steps 1-3 and 5, followed by a longer debate on the solemnisation of same-sex marriage and differentiated structures. For some months this seemed to me an attractive 'Anglican' compromise. However, I now want to advance the view that we should move forward with all seven measures in the near future, for the following reasons:

- i. It is becoming increasingly difficult to have any kind of public debate on these issues without further damaging Christian witness to the nation.
- ii. A way forward that does not enable the solemnisation of marriage will not satisfy our wider culture.
- iii. Differentiation of provision and oversight will be needed for some, even for steps 1-3 above.
- iv. All sections of the Church and society are weary of the conversation: we need to reach a resolution and move on.

In Part 3 of the essay we will now revisit the Bible and the interpretation of the Bible to see how far these steps would be compatible with the Bible.

Part 3: Would these changes be consistent with the Scriptures?

Whenever the Church faces a question about an ethical point or doctrinal understanding or adjustment to advances in knowledge, it is vital for the Christian community to take this question to the Scriptures.

This part of the enquiry is both time-consuming and demanding. It is tempting for parts of the Church to advocate a shortcut here: to move immediately from the evident goods of same-sex unions, and the harm done by the present settlement, to change that settlement, without first engaging with the foundational and authoritative teachings of the faith, the Scriptures.

But if that happens, there is a risk that the authority and primacy of Scripture is undermined over a much broader range of topics. If there is to be development from a current position, grounded in Scripture, it is vital that the implications for our understanding of the Scriptures are understood and a new interpretation articulated clearly.

The Bible is a beautiful collection of writings, but also a large and complex one. It is not easy to know where to begin in such an enquiry. Again, the LLF resources have marshalled the perspectives and insights of a wide range of biblical texts to support learning on these issues, within and beyond the Church, in far greater detail than I am able to offer here.

My own presentation will, however, attempt to put forward a more sustained argument in favour of change and development, tested against specific texts and particular principles of interpretation.

I have structured this part of the argument into seven sections:

- The testimony of the whole of Scripture to human equality and worth
- Some key principles of biblical interpretation
- The biblical prohibitions against sex between people of the same gender
- The trajectories of Scripture

- The fruit of our interpretation
- Is there positive endorsement of same-sex partnerships in Scripture?
- Have there been similar developments in ethics and pastoral practice in the past which cause us to revise our interpretation of Scripture?

The testimony of Scripture to human equality and worth

“No human being is worth more than another because of their gender, the colour of their skin, their bodily characteristics, their abilities, their sexuality, their marital status, or even their stance in the Church’s debates about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. The ideas we are discussing now, however, push us to go beyond that. Human diversity is to be welcomed and celebrated. The love of God is displayed in human lives not despite their being different, but in and through their differences. The infinite glory of God is imaged in and through the intricate pattern of human lives – in all their colours and shapes and sizes – and what we see would be diminished if that variety were to be absent.”

*Living in Love & Faith*⁸

God loves us all, in all of our diversity and variety. Every person in creation is infinitely precious to our Maker, Creator and Redeemer. Every person in creation is equally precious in the sight of God. Every person. Without exception.

All of our debates in the area of human sexuality, and the conclusions we reach, need to be measured against this fundamental truth, which God reveals to us through the whole of the Scriptures. These foundational truths, on which Christians are united, are the frame for our debates around areas that are contested. Our navigation of questions such as the blessing of same-sex marriage or sex between people of the same gender, is within this broader framework of the dignity and worth of every person God has made and a desire for their flourishing.

In this sense, and profoundly, the whole of Scripture is relevant to the questions under discussion here, in that the whole of Scripture is concerned with the wonder of being human and made in God’s image and with human flourishing.⁹ This key understanding of human worth flows, most of all, from the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ and the life that Jesus lives, his love for all, his saving death and resurrection.

Given this understanding of human worth and dignity, which is unfolded from Genesis to Revelation, how are we then to live? The foundational trajectory of Scripture is of recognising this dignity, worth and equality; of God's immense love for each person in creation; and then seeking to extend that dignity, worth and equality to all.

Key principles of biblical interpretation

The way in which Christians read and interpret the Bible is key to our understanding the life of the Church, and Christians have engaged with the deep questions of interpretation since the days of the New Testament. When the two disciples walk to Emmaus with the risen Christ, in Luke 24, they testify to the way in which, "beginning with Moses and all the prophets he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the Scriptures." The word that is translated here as "interpreted" is the Greek word from which we derive "hermeneutics": the discipline of biblical interpretation.

Four principles seem particularly important in this difficult and sensitive debate.

Christ at the centre

The ways in which we listen to the Scriptures together should be Christ-like. We approach the Scriptures poor in spirit, with empty hands, in need of light and guidance, rather than bringing our certainties. We come with a thirst to listen to Jesus through the text and to discern the character, person and love of Christ at the heart of Scriptures. This is where we meet Jesus. The primary purpose of Scripture, as in the Emmaus Road story, is to reveal the person of Christ and to help us to encounter the risen Christ. One of the key tests of whether we are reading and interpreting Scripture correctly is the test of love. In the words of St. Augustine:

“So anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine Scriptures, or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbour, has not yet succeeded in understanding them. Anyone who derives from them an idea which is useful for supporting this love, but fails to say what the writer demonstrably meant in the passage has not made a fatal error and is certainly not a liar.”¹⁰

As I listen to the stories and experiences of LGBTQ+ people, all of my pastoral instincts point to finding a way of interpreting the Scriptures that allows for greater love and support, tolerance and the blessing of their partnerships, even

where this interpretation seems, at first sight, to be in conflict with some of the obvious interpretations of key biblical passages.

The primacy of mercy

One of the consequences of setting Christ, and the person of Christ, at the heart of our interpretation of the Scriptures must be establishing the primacy of mercy over judgement. The Gospels witness to the tenderness, gentleness and forgiveness that is at the heart of the character of Christ and present both in Jesus' teaching ("Blessed are the merciful...") and in his actions (we think of the story of the Good Samaritan, of the many miracles of healing and deliverance, and of Jesus' words and actions in the house of Simon the Pharisee). This quality of mercy is why we love him.

I realise that, of course, Jesus calls everyone to repentance and a change of heart, throughout his ministry. There is a strand in Jesus' teaching about upholding righteousness and the law – sometimes setting out a much stricter interpretation than the Rabbis of the day. But repeatedly in the Gospels, judgement and mercy are brought into contrast with each other, through the encounters of Christ with the Pharisees and teachers of the law. In every instance, Christ prefers and privileges mercy, grace and gentleness.

I would argue that the calling of the Church is to follow a similar path and to continually embed this principle of mercy within our institutional life. To follow the primacy of mercy means to be willing to change and adapt pastoral practice alongside the culture we seek to serve, as it itself changes in the light of new knowledge and understanding.

In Luke 6:36, Jesus commands his followers: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." Some commentators argue that this teaching is a deliberate counterpoint to the holiness code of Leviticus with its repeated refrain: "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (Leviticus 11.45).

The Church has a dual vocation to mercy and to holiness. In moments of cultural transition, it takes time to discern the right way to combine them within our corporate life. Where there is conflict and a difficulty in reaching the right interpretation, it seems to me we should prefer and privilege, in our discernment, the way of mercy.

The silence of Jesus

As many have pointed out, Jesus himself is largely silent on the matters of human sexuality. This seems to me, as to many, to be significant. In engaging

with these questions, there is no dominical example or saying we can quote that directly relates to homosexual attraction. This is in contrast to at least one other issue relating to marriage.

During the 20th century, the Anglican Church wrestled with the difficult question of remarriage after divorce, first through permitting the blessing of civil marriage and then through allowing remarriage in church after divorce. In 1990, a provision was made for those who had been married previously, when their ex-partner was still living, to explore a vocation to ordination through a special Faculty Process. As recently as 2012, a similar provision was made for priests who were divorced to be considered as candidates for episcopal ministry.

The debates around remarriage and divorce were difficult and contested. I remember, as a curate in the 1980s, attending briefing meetings on potential change that were bitterly argued. The strength of feeling arose, in part, from the reality that on this issue in the Gospels, Jesus is not silent, and in general takes a tougher stance on questions of divorce than his contemporaries. Nevertheless, in the changing cultural context of late-20th century Britain, the Church of England chose the path of mercy over judgement, eventually allowing the remarriage of divorcees (though made important concessions to the individual conscience of ministers and due safeguards against scandal). Looking back over 30 years to those decisions, they undoubtedly stand the test of time and have enabled the Church to offer ministry and grace to tens of thousands of couples and families at key moments of their lives.

Permission for development

By contrast, there is a strong thread in the Gospels of Christ giving responsibility to the Church for the crafting of ethics and practice in ways appropriate in each culture. It is this flexibility that has allowed for incarnational mission in many different cultural settings down the ages.

In Matthew 16, Jesus says to Peter:

“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

This is a remarkable statement. The Christian Church is entrusted with responsibility and flexibility in matters of ethics, consistent with the principles of love, to enable development and evolution in the light of changes in knowledge and the culture in which the gospel is taking form and shape.

The debates around human sexuality in the life of the Church have not been caused by a desire on the part of some Christians to be unfaithful to the teachings of Scripture, though all too often they can be portrayed in this way. The debates are created by a fundamental shift in perspective of the wider culture, and an increase in knowledge about human sexuality and the human condition that has happened over several generations. This increase in knowledge and understanding leads us to ask whether it is possible to adjust and revise the traditional teaching of the Church to accommodate these new and well-established truths, in order that the Church may offer a better witness to the love of God in Christ. My own view is that this is indeed possible and is part of the responsibility Jesus has committed to the Church.

This view is also supported by the teaching about the Spirit given by Jesus in the Gospel of John:

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:12-14).

The prohibitions in biblical texts

The resistance to changing the current position of the Church of England on sexually active same-sex partnerships is principally focused on the prohibition, in biblical texts, on sexual activity between two people of the same gender. How can it be possible for the Church to bless partnerships in which sexual activity is sanctioned when this seems to be expressly forbidden in a number of texts?

As LLF acknowledges, these texts have, down the years, been weaponised against LGBTQ+ people in deadly ways and have become a source of immense pain. This needs to be acknowledged in every reference to them. No-one would think to limit what the Bible says about straight people by discussing only the 360 or so prohibitions against different kinds of straight sex that are threaded through the pages of the Bible. Nevertheless, these texts continue to play an important part in the debate. There is an excellent and nuanced discussion in LLF, which I would commend.

The Old Testament texts

Given the size and scope of the Old Testament, it is striking that there are only four texts in which same-sex relations come into focus: the story of Sodom and

Gomorrah, in Genesis 18:26-19:29; two passages in Leviticus, which prohibit sex between men; and a passage prohibiting cult prostitution, in Deuteronomy 23:17-18.

These passages have been the subject of extensive study and debate, focused and summarised helpfully in the LLF resources. The passages in Genesis and Deuteronomy are not about sex between consenting adults within a partnership: the first is about rape, the second about prostitution. It is therefore difficult to draw any clear lessons from them about sexual expression in our own society. We are therefore left with the two short verses from Leviticus.

Leviticus 18:22 comes within a list of prohibitions about sexual relations, specifying that: “you shall not lie with a male as with a woman.” Leviticus 20:13 repeats the prohibition and, in the context of setting out draconian penalties for a range of sexual offenses, specifies the death penalty here also. Are these passages a roadblock to further change and development?

A first question to ask is how many other commandments and regulations in Leviticus does the Church keep and teach today? If we read this part of the Pentateuch carefully, we will see that the answer is that we keep very few, either in the substance of the teaching or in the penalties for transgression in the community. There has therefore already been substantial revision and development in the life of the people of God.

There is a powerful moment in the HBO drama, *The West Wing*, when President Bartlet is confronted by a Christian fundamentalist who quotes Leviticus 18:22 to him at a White House event. President Bartlet’s response, drawing out this wider point, is worth quoting in full (with due credit given to the writer, Aaron Sorkin):

“I wanted to ask you a couple of questions while I have you here. I’m interested in selling my youngest daughter into slavery as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. She’s a Georgetown sophomore, speaks fluent Italian, always cleared the table when it was her turn. What would a good price for her be? While thinking about that, can I ask another? My Chief of Staff, Leo McGarry, insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly says he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself or is it okay to call the police? Here’s one that’s really important, because we’ve got a lot of sports fans in this town: touching the skin of a dead pig makes one unclean. Leviticus 11:7. If they promise to wear gloves, can the Washington Redskins still play football? Can Notre Dame? Can West Point? Does the

whole town really have to be together to stone my brother John for planting different crops side by side? Can I burn my mother in a small family gathering for wearing garments made from two different threads?”¹¹

The reason why none of these actions is appropriate is that the view of ethics and morality set out in Leviticus has been revised and adapted within the Biblical period and beyond it, in the light of the incarnation, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because of these truths, everything has changed.

The New Testament texts

As we have seen, Jesus and the Gospels are silent on the question of same-sex sexual relationships although, as I have argued above, the character and actions of Jesus are our strongest guide in our interpretation of these texts today. However, there are a series of four further texts within the New Testament that lie at the foundation of the Church’s prohibitions against same-sex activity. Again, note that the number of these texts is not large and none of them is an extensive, intentional treatment of the subject.

Jude 7 is not a specific prohibition but looks back to the sexual immorality of Sodom and Gomorrah, ascribed in the tradition by this time (but not the original Genesis passage) chiefly to homosexual activity. The terms used in Jude 7 are general terms for sexual immorality, which I will discuss below.

1 Timothy 1:10 is a list of the “lawless and disobedient”. As part of that list of 14 subgroups, the letter lists the “*arsonekoitai*”. The same term, along with another, is used in a similar list in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. This time there are 10 subgroups of those who will not inherit the kingdom of God.

“Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolators, adulterers, *malakoi*, *arsenekoitai*, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers – none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God”.

I have retained the Greek terms here for two reasons. The first is because it is vital to ask what these terms mean in their context. The second is to highlight the highly offensive term “sodomites”, which is retained in the NRSV and other translations and has been used as a pernicious and detrimental term in the persecution of LGBTQ+ people down the centuries. For that reason, it has no place in a contemporary translation of Holy Scripture.

Note the wide scope of the categories in this Corinthian's verse. There will not be many people who can say they do not fall within any of its categories. Greed, drunkenness and reviling (verbally abusive) cover the majority of us in some part of our lives. Much depends, in reading this passage, on whether we put the stress on verse 9, the list of sinners, or on verse 10, the miracle that each of us is saved by grace. I would argue that the emphasis on the final verse serves the point Paul is making here.

But who are the *malekoi* and *arsenekoitai*? The meaning of both terms is contested and the extent of the literature on these terms is a measure of how much weight has been placed on this verse and the related text in 1 Timothy. Some argue that these terms (in their context), particularly the second, refer to all types of same-sex relationships: the complete span of homosexual activity, including within stable and faithful same-sex partnerships. Others argue that the terms refer to particular kinds of abusive same-sex relationships based on an unequal power relationship or exploitation of one party by another.

The first view would support no change in the present position of the Church. The second supports change through the argument that what we see today in civil partnerships and civil marriage is qualitatively different. These terms do not refer to the place of sexual activity within a mutually consensual, permanent and stable same-sex relationship.

Finally, Romans 1:26-27 is part of Paul's analysis of the human condition without Christ. Same-sex expression, activity and desire is cited as one of the consequences of human sin, which at its heart is rooted in idolatry and turning away from God:

“For this reason, God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own person the due penalty for their error.”

Here Paul does seem to refer unambiguously to same-sex relations between both men and women, and describes both as an outworking of sin and judgement in the universal human condition. Paul is mirroring (rather than challenging) the Jewish understanding of same-sex relationships in his day, which also came to characterise the Church (and was in contrast with some of the prevailing morality in the culture of his day). Certainly, our science and knowledge of sexual identity and orientation has moved on. The argument

is not that some categories of sin are worse than others. This whole section in Romans leads to the conclusion that all have sinned, and no-one can be justified before God in the light of the law. Neither does Paul turn his analysis of the human condition into a specific prohibition against same-sex sexual expression in the Church.

In applying Romans 1:26-27 to contemporary ethics and morality, we need to ask the question: Has our understanding of same-sex desire and attraction changed significantly because of advances in science, social science and culture, such that we would now offer a more nuanced interpretation for gender and same-gender relations? In my view that case can be made and, in the light of that increased and better understanding, justifies a careful revision to the doctrine and teaching of the Church.

The biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann has recently revisited this debate in an essay: *How to read the Bible on homosexuality*.¹² Brueggemann acknowledges the texts of rigour cited above, which seem to exclude certain people or practices from the company of the people of God. However, Brueggemann also argues that these texts of rigour are balanced by parallel texts of welcome. He cites Isaiah 56:3-8 (“Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say”) as a refutation of the prohibition in Deuteronomy 23:1 (on eunuchs). He cites Matthew 11:28-30 (“Come to me all who are weary”) and Galatians 3:28 (“No longer Jew or Greek...”) and, most tellingly, the great narrative of the inclusion of the Gentiles in Acts 10-15 (“Do not call anything impure that God has made clean”).

The trajectories of Scripture

Is it possible to discern, within Scripture, an overall trajectory on this issue, which enables the Church to, as it were, continue with that trajectory and development? Here again, opinion is divided.

This argument of a trajectory has been significant in at least four other issues in recent centuries: in debates around slavery, about apartheid, and the reception of the ministry of women in leadership in the Church.

It may come as a shock to some readers that there could ever be a debate rooted in the Scriptures around either slavery or apartheid. In fact, both issues were bitterly contested on biblical grounds. Those who wanted to abolish the slave trade were opposed by others who argued, from the multiple references to slavery in the Old and New Testaments, for the retaining of the institution. Similarly, apartheid in South Africa and racial segregation in North America and elsewhere

in the world have been justified from biblical texts (mainly in the Old Testament) that focus on racial purity and the separation of God's chosen people.¹³

The more recent debates, on the reception of the ministry of women, have been rooted and grounded in the interpretation of the Scriptures. There are several New Testament passages that forbid women from speaking in church or exercising leadership over men.¹⁴

In each of these debates, Scripture has been balanced against Scripture. How is the Church to reach the correct interpretation? One tool deployed is that of the overall trajectory of Scripture, which is demonstrably against slavery, racial discrimination and division, and the exclusion of women from leadership (though the last of these debates continues both within the Church of England and other churches).

Many evangelicals with a high view of the Scriptures find themselves persuaded by this trajectory argument on the question of the equality and inclusion of women in leadership and ministry, despite the prohibitions to the contrary contained in some parts of the New Testament. However, they are unable to discover a parallel trajectory on questions of human sexuality and the recognition of same-sex relationships.

I believe that trajectory is manifestly present. The direction of travel in the New Testament trajectory is undeniably towards the worth of each individual, the equal value of all humanity, and the freedom that is entrusted to us in Christ.

The central sections of the Acts of the Apostles explore, in detail, the process by which the Christian gospel came to the Gentiles and the ensuing debate about how much of the Law of Moses the new Gentile Christians should be expected to keep. Should they be circumcised and must they keep the whole law? If only part, then which part? The same debate recurs in the Letters to the Romans and Galatians.

As Acts tells the story, the decision is made that the Gentile Christians are not to be bound by the law of Moses (15:19-20). It is this decision that sets the overall trajectory for the Church, and it allows significant latitude, development and interpretation in the detail of ethical practice that flows from it. We stand within this trajectory today, and the consequences of the decisions described in Acts 15 are continuing to unfold.

The apostles write to the Gentile churches and send Barnabas and Paul to deliver their message, which says, among other things:

“For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.”
(Acts 15:28-29).

Three of the four things to be avoided in the letter relate to temple sacrifice and the meat markets. Given the importance of the letter, it is interesting to note how much development there has been in these three areas. The culture (and the position of idolatry) has changed. Few Christians today would give a second thought to the way in which their meat is slaughtered, or if they do then the concerns would focus on animal welfare and the care of creation. The trajectory here is undoubtedly towards freedom in Christ.

The fourth element to be avoided in the letter is “*porneia*”: the Greek term meaning fornication or “bad sex” as one translation has it. In the New Testament and throughout the Christian tradition, sex is ethically important. The way we conduct ourselves as Christians in this area of our lives matters in terms of our integrity, identity, and the love we demonstrate to others.

But the apostles are very careful not to define “*porneia*” closely in their letter. Christian reflection on sexual conduct has led to different conclusions in different cultures, and with different advances in science and cultural understanding. Through the course of the 20th century, the global Church engaged in a long debate on the morality of contraception within marriage. This was concerned, of course, not only with the new advances made possible through technology and science but also with the changing role of women. In the early part of the 20th century, the use of artificial contraception was widely regarded as wrong. This is still the official position of the Roman Catholic Church globally. Across much of the rest of the Church there is a positive acceptance of the benefits of contraception and a consequent shift in our understanding of the purposes and nature of sexual expression. With each advance in scientific understanding, the Church needs to reconsider the implications for ethics, life and personal conscience.

The changes advocated here towards the blessing of permanent, stable same-sex relationships are, I therefore argue, in a similar trajectory to that begun in Acts 15 and continued in the debates of the 20th century around divorce and

contraception. An increase in knowledge and understanding and the culture around us, leads to a revisiting and reframing of our ethical frameworks for the sake of the flourishing of all. In this instance, the moves outlined do not mean abandoning the idea that sexual immorality per se is wrong and dangerous. They do mean a modest redrawing of the boundaries of what constitutes that sexual immorality.

The fruit of our interpretation

“You will know them by their fruits,” says Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. “Are grapes gathered from thorns or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.”

Fruits and consequences are key to our discernment, which has therefore to be about more than attempting to apply specific texts to particular actions. What are the broader fruits of the Church of England’s current position on human sexuality in contemporary culture, holding to the view that it is wrong to bless same-sex unions, to allow clergy to marry their civil partners and to prohibit clergy and ordinands from an active sexual relationship?

The fruits of our practice have become all too visible in recent years. For individuals, there are feelings of shame and unworthiness on the part of many LGBTQ+ people within the Church; despair, loneliness and desolation leading to depression and, sometimes, attempted suicide; efforts to change sexual identity within oneself or others; failed or damaging marriages for those trying to be something that they are not; and a failure to acknowledge the reality of sexual identity, which leads to dishonesty. In our culture, there is a growing alienation between the institutional Church and much of society, because of a perceived lack of love and fairness.

On the other hand, what are the fruits of loving, faithful, same-sex relationships? Many and various, as I perceive them. Christian people are enabled to live better and more fulfilled lives, make a more valuable contribution to our wider society and culture, provide stable families for children, and be a greater blessing to the communities in which they are set.

Is there bad fruit from acceptance of, or the blessing of, these relationships? If there is, I cannot see it. To be sure, a relationship between two people

of the same sex can go wrong, just as a relationship between a man and a woman can. But overall, our society has been enriched, not diminished, by the encouragement of stable same-sex unions.

Affirmations

Those who resist change and development in the position of the Church sometimes offer a counter argument – that to justify change there must also be positive models within the Scriptures for same-sex partnerships and relationships. Their absence becomes then a barrier to change.

It seems to me that, given the understanding of same-sex relationships that permeates the biblical world view, this is asking too much of the text. There are certainly representations of deep friendships, households, and familial relationships between people of the same sex that are not marriage (as between David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi, the household of Mary and Martha and Lazarus, or the centurion and his servant). But, given the prohibitions that remained valid for the people of God, it is not surprising that there are no unambiguous examples in the Bible of same-sex relationships of a kind we see today.

What we do see are affirmations of two of the deepest truths about humanity – at the head of the biblical tradition, in Genesis 1 and 2 – which bear on the issue. The first is priority of our common humanity over and above gender, expressed in the first creation account, in Genesis 1:27:

“So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

This is a sophisticated account of gender. We are one common humanity before we are gendered beings, male and female. It seems to me this truth is able to accommodate fluidity, minorities and exceptions in our understanding of gender, as part of the wonderful diversity of creation.

The second truth is found in the second creation story, in Genesis 2, where God says: “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” This deep insight is the prelude, of course, to the creation of woman and the institution of marriage. But it remains a deep truth that all human beings are created for fellowship and community. In the majority of lives, that longing for fellowship finds its fulfilment in lifelong, faithful partnerships. For the majority this means heterosexual marriage. Other

patterns of life, including singleness and celibacy are affirmed and blessed in the Scriptures, not least through the example of Jesus. But to deny the goods of fulfilling partnerships to those whose orientation is not heterosexual seems unjust and unfaithful to this part of the Scriptures.

These verses are balanced, to some degree, by Genesis 2:22-4: the institution of marriage in creation (and significantly, before the story of the fall). Here the text views marriage as, from the beginning, between a man and woman – complementary genders enabling each to become one flesh and fulfil of the command to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. This text (foundational in the traditional understanding of marriage), undoubtedly merits further exploration in the debate around the Church's ability to solemnise a marriage between two people of the same gender. However, it seems to me that it should not prevent the blessing of a same-sex union and partnership, which at the very least is analogous to Christian marriage and a source of blessing to the couple concerned and to their families.

Is it reasonable to go further and argue that for the minority of people who are attracted to others of the same gender, marriage is possible between those of the same sex? This would be a necessary step on the way to removing the legal barriers to same-sex marriage in the Church of England. Christians who want to recognise same-sex partnerships will take different views on this, with some preferring simply to bless and others determining that the solemnisation of a marriage is possible and desirable. As a Church we continue to grow in our understanding of a very recent development. My hope would be that we will find a way as the Church of England to be generous in our discernment of what is possible whilst leaving a number of pathways open to individual choice, both for couples and for ministers.

There is a broad arc of biblical narrative which flows from Genesis 2.22-24 which finds in marriage and the love between two people a pattern for the relationship between a person and God; between God and Israel, his bride (for example in Hosea 1 and 2); and from there to the relationship between Christ and his bride, the Church (see Ephesians 5.25-33 and elsewhere). For some this profound and beautiful analogy becomes another barrier to recognising same-sex relationships as marriage. Yet it need not be so. The analogy does not depend on differentiated or complementary genders so much as on deep devotion, freely given, sacrificial love and mutual submission one to another.

Similar developments in ethics and pastoral practice

We have discussed already the long and sharp debates around slavery, apartheid, contraception, the remarriage of divorcees and the reception of the ministry of women in the life of the Church. We might add the parallel debate about lending money at interest. All these movements have involved vigorous debate and often conflict between Christians, over several generations. All have involved careful engagement with the Scriptures and, over time, the responsible revision of our interpretation of Scripture, as part of moving forward. The effects of such debates, when done responsibly, is not to undermine the authority of the Scriptures but to enhance that authority.

The long story of the Church is one with two different kinds of development, in ethics and pastoral practice, which can be seen as a long unfolding of the dramatic consequences for the gospel of freedom in Christ.

Contextual and incarnational mission

The first is the principle of contextual and incarnational mission, which enables the gospel to take on different shape and identity within different cultures. This is more than an effective method for the spread of the gospel. It is closely related to the pattern of the incarnation of the Word of God in Christ: the self-emptying of the Son of God described in Philippians 2. Mission is most authentically Christian when it follows this pattern and works from first principles in different cultures, in establishing both Church and gospel. Vincent Donovan's book, *Christianity Rediscovered*,¹⁵ remains one of the best introductions to these aspects of mission.

In the Protestant and Catholic traditions, this has led to both pastoral accommodation and the revision of pastoral practice. When Christian mission has encountered cultures that practise polygamy, for example, there has often been pastoral accommodation to that practice (with the aim of gradually working towards the monogamy commended in Scripture and the tradition). Granted, this is a temporary provision, not a revision of ethics, but it would not be unreasonable for a contemporary missionary, approaching our own culture from the outside, to conclude that for our society to be able to listen to and to receive the wider message of the gospel, accommodation is necessary on questions of same-sex relationships.

One set of tools, developed by the Jesuit missions of the 16th century, remains highly relevant to our current debates, an approach called 'casuistry'. The first Jesuits carried the gospel over great distances to far off cultures, particularly

in China and Japan. They encountered different moralities and practices and had the wisdom to realise that an approach to ethics that argued only from first principles was not able to accommodate new technologies and approaches to life that were not envisaged when these principles were formed. The methodology works through finding analogies: What is this most like and therefore how should the Church respond?

Many Christians take the inherited position because they attempt to work from first principles: What does the Bible say we should do (or what has the Church traditionally taught)? In this view, the first principles are drawn from the biblical prohibitions, all active same-sex relationships are seen as wrong and the pastoral practice of the church should therefore continue to reflect this view.

But suppose we begin not with these first principles but from analogies. What is this permanent, faithful, stable, long-term partnership between people of the same sex most like? Does it resemble promiscuous and immoral behaviour? Or does it resemble much more closely something that is very like a Christian understanding of marriage? I would argue, very much the latter. On the grounds of this analogy, the Church should therefore conform its pastoral practice to this new understanding.¹⁶

Advances in knowledge and understanding

The second kind of change has emerged from advances in knowledge and understanding about the world or the human condition. The Christian faith sets a high store on reason and evidenced argument (although the relative weight placed on reason and human experience varies from tradition to tradition).

The Bible has a particular understanding of cosmology and the development of the universe, which emerged in dialogue with the cultures of the ancient Near East and is described in the early chapters of Genesis. Over time, through the advances of science, itself encouraged through the churches and the universities they founded, the discoveries of science challenged this cosmology. Earth is not at the centre of the universe. The geological age of Earth is much older than the biblical narrative. The evolutionary chain connecting the development of life on Earth gives a different, if complementary, account to Genesis. Christians debated each stage of these developments, but over time, for most Christians, the new knowledge from the sciences led to a changed understanding of the universe and a revised interpretation of the Scriptures.

As a further example, the 20th century saw massive developments in the field of psychology and in humanity's shared understanding of mental illness and

mental breakdown. These developments have also shaped and influenced the pastoral practice of the Church. We routinely use the insights of psychology and other human sciences in pastoral practice – in bereavement, relationship counselling, meditation or other therapies. This increased understanding has deeply affected and changed the way many in the Church read and understand, for example, the many miracles of deliverance described in the Gospels. Our knowledge changes our understanding again.

And as a third example, which I touched on above, reflect for a moment on the changing role of women in societies across the world over the last 100 years. The early feminist movements owed something to the insights about equality and freedom in the New Testament. But gender equality in public life has also been opposed on the grounds of Scripture and the tradition. Experience, education and reason have all contributed to a much more equal understanding of gender across all traditions in the Church of England. Even the minority traditions, which continue to restrict some ministries in the life of the Church only to men, would never seek to argue that a woman could not be a prime minister, a doctor or a manager.

If the common understanding of our faith, our ethics and our pastoral practice can change and evolve because of our increased knowledge and experience, derived from the sciences and the human sciences in all these areas, why should it not evolve and develop in similar, careful and considered ways in our response to questions of human sexuality?

Part 4: Moving forward together

The Church of England is not holding its debate on same-sex relationships in isolation from the global Church. Every Christian denomination across the world is engaging in similar debates. Many Provinces of the Anglican Communion are exploring the issues. Over the past two decades, there have been understandable concerns within the Church of England about how a change in our own position would affect relationships across the Anglican Communion.

The recent Lambeth Conference, held in July and August 2022, addressed this issue in the ‘Call on Human Dignity’. The Call, quoting from Lambeth Resolution I.10 of 1998, acknowledges a legitimate diversity of two positions across the different member Churches, each of which is seeking to be faithful to the mission of God in its own context:

“Prejudice on the basis of gender or sexuality, threatens human dignity. Given Anglican polity, and especially the autonomy of Provinces, there is disagreement and a plurality of views on the relationship between human dignity and human sexuality. Yet, we experience the safeguarding of dignity in deepening dialogue. It is the mind of the Anglican Communion as a whole, that “all baptised, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are full members of the Body of Christ” and to be welcomed, cared for, and treated with respect (I.10, 1998). Many Provinces continue to affirm that same-gender marriage is not permissible. Lambeth Resolution I.10 (1998) states that the “legitimising or blessing of same-sex unions” cannot be advised. Other Provinces have blessed and welcomed same-sex union/marriage after careful theological reflection and a process of reception. As bishops, we remain committed to listening and walking together to the maximum possible degree, despite our deep disagreement on these issues.”

Lambeth Call: Human Dignity, Affirmation 2.3, 2022¹⁷

This Call (revised at the Conference) needs to be read in parallel with Archbishop Justin’s courageous statement to the Conference,¹⁸ made before the Call was discussed, for which he received a standing ovation:

“For the large majority of the Anglican Communion, the traditional understanding of marriage is something that is understood, accepted and without question, not only by bishops but their entire Church and

the societies in which they live. For them, to question this teaching is unthinkable, and in many countries would make the Church a victim of derision, contempt and even attack. For many Churches, to change traditional teaching challenges their very existence.

“For a minority, we can say almost the same. They have not arrived lightly at their ideas that traditional teaching needs to change. They are not careless about Scripture. They do not reject Christ. But they have come to a different view on sexuality, after long prayer, deep study, and reflection on understandings of human nature. For them, to question this different teaching is unthinkable, and in many countries is making the Church a victim of derision, contempt and even attack. For these Churches, not to change traditional teaching challenges their very existence.

“So let us not treat each other lightly or carelessly. We are deeply divided. That will not end soon. We are called by Christ himself both to truth and unity.”

The process leading to the Call on Human Dignity was undoubtedly difficult for many. However, this honest statement of difference and the needs of the Church in different contexts, I hope, opens the way for the Church of England to reflect on how best to serve the needs of our own culture in this respect.

There is a similar sense of reality in our wider ecumenical dialogue. At senior level, there seems to me to be a recognition that these issues are live and challenging in every denomination; that every church needs to engage with the debate and that, in the end, living with diversity well, in different places, will be a wise and helpful way forward. Within the United Kingdom and the rest of Europe, churches are making new pastoral accommodations and changes to their understanding of marriage but also finding ways to live their diversity well in a changing world.

Living with diversity well

The Church of England has been exploring the questions around human sexuality for more than a decade now, through three related processes: the Pilling Report and the debate that followed; the national and regional Shared Conversations; and the LLF process. Much has continued to change in our wider national culture through this period, in the continued progress towards equality and recognition of LGBTQ+ people. Little has changed within the Church.

There has been some good fruit from these three processes, in particular a recognition of the pain and difficulties experienced within Church and society by LGBTQ+ people and their families and the depth of study and learning encouraged by LLF. However, public debate within the Church of England is becoming ever more difficult as the gap between the Church and the wider culture grows.

There are many other issues rightly seeking to claim the attention of the Church, not least the call to support the communities we serve and the wider world in the work of recovery and rebuilding from the COVID-19 crisis. Nevertheless, it is timely now to attempt to reach conclusions and a settlement around the questions of human sexuality and the different views within the Church.

It seems to me that any new settlement must provide the Church of England with a way to live well with a deep diversity of views, to respect the consciences of others both for and against change and to maintain the highest degree of unity we can for the sake of our common mission to the world. In Romans 14, St. Paul addresses questions on which the Christians of his day disagreed: in particular around diet and festivals. The way Paul commends is twofold: both respecting the consciences of others and allowing diversity within the Body of Christ.

Any settlement must be founded on love and respect: love and respect for LGBTQ+ people and their families, within and beyond the Church; love and respect for those who take many different views on sexual ethics. This love must be the hallmark of our debates and conduct through this season.

A step change in our liturgical and pastoral practice

In the light of, now, ten years of reflection, as argued above, I believe that we should take the following four very important steps:

1. Enable the provision of public services of blessing for same-sex civil partnerships and marriages.
2. Give freedom of conscience to clergy and ordinands to order their relationships appropriately.
3. Give freedom of conscience to clergy to enter into same-sex civil marriage.
4. Remove the legal barriers to the solemnisation of same-sex marriage in the Church of England.

In addition if changes are to be made in these ways, we will also need to ensure:

5. The recognition that it is a legitimate and honourable position within the Church of England to continue to hold to the traditional view of marriage and human sexuality.
6. Freedom of conscience to clergy and parishes not to opt in to the new possible arrangements for services of blessing and same-sex marriage.
7. Differentiation of provision and oversight for those clergy and parishes who believe that, in conscience, they need to distance themselves from the parts of the Church that welcome and affirm same-sex relationships.

In the dialogues I have been part of over the recent years, these three different kinds of provision have been explored and proposed for those who in conscience hold to the traditional understanding of the Church. I believe all three to be vital.

The first is the underscoring of the validity and integrity of the more conservative position in the Church of England's polity and understanding. Our clergy and parishes from a variety of traditions and backgrounds must be able to minister with integrity and conviction according to a conservative reading of Scripture. This means a high commitment to mutual respect and love, and to taking great care with the language used to describe the consequences of this position. While we need to acknowledge the pain and difficulty of LGBTQ+ people, given the present position of the Church, I am very hesitant indeed about ascribing this pain to particular individuals or groups within the Church or as the consequence of particular theologies. I am equally hesitant about reaching for the emotive language of abuse, or about any language that attributes individual blame in general terms to pastors or to churches, or that suggests that the affliction of pain and difficulty is intentional. In my observation, churches and clergy from these more conservative positions continue to be a blessing and to bear fruit in a whole variety of different ministries, often including the welcome and care extended to LGBTQ+ people. They are sisters and brothers in Christ. It would be a tragedy if a journey towards inclusion for one group of Christians became an experience of exclusion for another.

The second is simple freedom of conscience (as outlined above). According to this view, it would not be right for a priest to be required to bless a same-sex union (still less solemnise a marriage) if their conscience would not allow them so to do. Similarly, it would not be right for a local church to host such a

blessing service if the majority view in that local congregation would find this challenging and difficult. In certain circumstances, it may not be possible, in good conscience, for local churches to receive the ministries of those who are themselves in same-sex partnerships.

These are sensitive and delicate matters. However, it should be possible to find ways through them if the Church of England is to take the steps described above. We have been able to accommodate a similar freedom of conscience in respect of the very similar matter of marriage after divorce, even though, as we have seen, the prohibitions against divorce comes from Jesus himself. The most helpful way to guarantee this freedom of conscience seems to me to structure the provision such that clergy and congregations opt into them, rather than have to opt out of them through the passing of resolutions in local Church Councils.

For the majority of those who are opposed to change or hesitant about change, these first two measures will be sufficient. However, some will need a third further provision: a differentiation of ministry and oversight. The argument here is that bishops who support these steps are, by that support, rendering their own ministry unacceptable to those who hold to the traditional understanding. These moves will be seen as a departure from the plain teaching of Scripture and the essentials of the faith. For some Anglicans and faithful members of the Church of England, these matters are first-order issues, rather than matters on which Christians can amicably agree to disagree. This is, naturally, a painful matter for the bishops themselves. But some alternative system of episcopal oversight may well be required to enable a differentiation of ministries, such as an alternative province and structure within the Church of England or a system of oversight from a neighbouring diocese.

This part of our conversation around ways forward is deeply sensitive. As a Church we continue to discover the consequences of differentiated ministries in response to the ordination of women as priests and bishops. We need to listen especially to the experiences of bishops who are women across the last seven years. My three episcopal colleagues in the Diocese of Oxford currently hold a different view from my own on whether such a further step should be made. But we agree that this part of the conversation needs to happen for the sake of brothers and sisters in Christ.

For myself, a significant part of the continued discernment we need to exercise as a Church will be around this question. I have been engaged in a detailed listening process over the last three years, with those who are conservative

on these issues within our own diocese and more widely across the Church of England. I recognise those who hold to these positions of conscience, sometimes at great cost, to be sisters and brothers in Christ. I love them dearly. I am committed to helping them continue to flourish in the coming years if the changes outlined here are taken forward. This listening and dialogue will need to continue alongside the broader discernment of whether change is right.

A conclusion

In 2017, the Archbishops called the Church to a radical, new Christian inclusion in the Church, founded in Scripture, in reason, in tradition, in theology and in the Christian faith as the Church of England has received it. This call to Christian inclusion was to be based on good, healthy, flourishing relationships and in a proper, 21st-century understanding of being human and being sexual.

The LLF resources have opened up debate and reflection across the whole Church, around a range of issues. I hope and pray that engaging with the resources will bring new understanding, love and faith. As I indicated in the introduction, this essay is focused on one aspect of the question only: on whether the Church of England should change its practice in relation to same-sex marriage and civil partnerships. There are many other debates still ahead of us.

However, at minimum I believe that this, a radical new Christian inclusion, demands more than a deeper understanding of human relationships and sexuality, as outlined by the LLF resources. It also demands a change to the pastoral practice of the Church of England in the present time, in the ways outlined here: the freedom to bless same-sex civil partnerships, to solemnise marriages and to allow greater freedom of conscience to clergy and ordinands and to those continuing to hold to the traditional view.

For my part, this is my discernment of what the Spirit is saying to the Church.

Endnotes

- [1] <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/living-love-and-faith/listening>
- [2] Including Strangers and Friends, Michael Vasey, (Hodder & Stoughton, 1985).
- [3] This letter can be found on the Diocese of Oxford website: <https://blogs.oxford.anglican.org/clothe-yourself-with-love/>
- [4] Two films describing these events and their consequences were published in 2018. You can find them at: <https://stjamesandemmanuel.org/beyond-inclusion>
- [5] Read the moving testimony of a colleague from Oxford on the General Synod of the Church of England, in Just Love, Jayne Özanne, (Darton Longman & Todd, 2018).
- [6] <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2018-07/issues%20in%20human%20sexuality.pdf>
- [7] See the official record of the Parliamentary debate in Hansard, 1 March 2019, beginning 11.04am. Volume 796, column 387 and recorded here: [https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2019-03-01/debates/1166F123-B474-4429-917B-C47D72434293/CivilPartnershipsMarriagesAndDeaths\(RegistrationEtc\)Bill?highlight=bishop%20oxford#contribution-A8D4EC32-3234-4859-A945-AD81852FE422](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2019-03-01/debates/1166F123-B474-4429-917B-C47D72434293/CivilPartnershipsMarriagesAndDeaths(RegistrationEtc)Bill?highlight=bishop%20oxford#contribution-A8D4EC32-3234-4859-A945-AD81852FE422)
- [8] Living in Love and Faith, pp.197-8
- [9] I am very grateful to my colleague Marcus Green for his continual underlining of this point both in conversation and his writing: The Possibility of Difference, Marcus Green, (Kevin Mayhew, 2018).
- [10] Saint Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, Book 1, 36:40.
- [11] The West Wing, ‘The Mid-Terms’ (season 2, episode 3), written by Aaron Sorkin. John Wells Productions & Warner Bros. Television.
- [12] <https://outreach.faith/2022/09/walter-brueggemann-how-to-read-the-bible-on-homosexuality/>
- [13] Richard Burrige chronicles the debate around apartheid in Imitating Jesus: an inclusive approach to New Testament ethics, Richard Burrige, (Eerdmans, 2007).
- [14] See, among other texts: Women and Men in Scripture and the Church: a guide to the key issues, , Steven Croft and Paula Gooder (eds), (Canterbury Press, 2013).
- [15] Christianity Rediscovered, Vincent Donovan, (SCM Press, new edition 2001).
- [16] I’m very indebted here to the author and podcaster Malcolm Gladwell, who explores casuistry in a short series of three podcasts: Revisionist History (season 4, episodes 5,6 and 7). Gladwell interviews and draws on the work of the Jesuit priest James Martin. <https://www.pushkin.fm/podcasts/revisionist-history>
- [17] Lambeth Call: Human Dignity, Affirmation 2.3, 2022: https://www.lambethconference.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/LC_Human-Dignity_ENG.pdf
- [18] <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/speaking-writing/speeches/lambeth-call-human-dignity-read-archbishop-justins-remarks/>



In November 2020, the Church of England published a comprehensive set of resources on the theme of human sexuality: *Living in Love & Faith*. In his own contribution to the next stage of discernment, Steven Croft considers the most pressing question: the Church of England's response to same-sex relationships. Sharing his personal journey from evangelical ministry in Yorkshire to serving Bishop of Oxford, and recounting poignant conversations with the LGBTQ+ community and conservative Christian groups, Bishop Steven offers reflections and practical suggestions on this challenging topic.

The Church has been exploring questions around human sexuality for more than a decade. Much has changed in our wider culture, but little has changed within the Church of England. Now is the time to move towards a resolution.