



Select Committee
on Human Sexuality
in the Context of
Christian Belief

The Guide

Executive
Summary





A Summary of the **Guide to the Listening, Learning and Dialogue on Human Sexuality in the Context of Christian Belief** issued by the Church of Ireland Select Committee on Human Sexuality in the Context of Christian Belief in January 2016.

Introduction

(please note that all page numbers refer to the full guide)

In May 2012 the General Synod of the Church of Ireland affirmed its belief that “marriage is part of God’s creation and a holy mystery in which one man and one woman become one flesh” while also recognising that there are “complex issues regarding human sexuality” and acknowledging that “members of the Church have at times hurt and wounded people by words and actions, in relation to human sexuality” (p.36).

Conscious of these beliefs and thoughts, the Church of Ireland has continued to encourage its members to share their understanding of Scripture and is facilitating a process of listening and learning.

The call to holiness

Deep within the heart of every Christian is a desire to imitate Christ. It is a call to holiness of life and so demands both the prayer for understanding and the intention to follow instruction. The Church of Ireland is walking a path of discernment over issues of sexual orientation, as it both enters into prayer and searches the Scriptures for instruction. The particular Biblical texts relating to these matters are common to all churches, and a careful study of them is essential (The Biblical Association of the Church of Ireland produced a useful and balanced course for Lent 2015, Same-Sex Issues and the Bible: 5 Bible Studies to support the Church’s discernment process. www.bibliahibernica.wordpress.com).

Faithful Understanding

Flowing from the study of the Scriptures is the interpretation that leads into action, requiring the skills of listening and engaging in conversation. Dr William Olhausen suggests that amongst the voices to be listened to are: The Holy Spirit, the totality of the Scriptures; the patterns of worship followed by the Church; the mind of the Church expressed throughout history; the experience of Christian people and the contribution of science (page 7). Dr Olhausen further suggests that the texts be considered to discern God’s Word, not only as it would have been received in the days they were written, but also as they are read today. He speaks of a ‘multi-layered approach’ to our conversation and, as a result, we may expect them to be demanding and drawing us deeply into communion one with another.

Being Human, Being Christian

Dr Andrew Pierce further aids our understanding by asking us to consider what it means to be human. We are encouraged to consider at an early stage just how different human beings are from each other. Importantly, this requires the will to cope with difference not ‘primarily to minimize or eradicate difference or otherness’ (p.11). This leads him to demonstrate for us how distinctive is the Christian interpretation of ‘the human condition’ and how that has been understood historically: “The Eastern Orthodox churches [...] offer a sunny estimate of human nature [...] Athanasius famously declared that God became a human being so that human beings

might become God", whilst in the Western Church (Catholic and Protestant) the influence has been the towering figure of St Augustine who first articulated the notion of 'original sin'. (p.12)

"Christianity, thus, exhibits a spectrum of theological understandings of the human person; some stress our possibilities [...] some dwell more on our liabilities". Dr Pierce reflects on Anglicanism thus: "[It is] concerned to comprehend both Catholic and Reformed, has not expressed a dogmatic view on the nature of the human person, and lives with an occasionally-uneasy internal pluralism which is pregnant with consequences for other areas of potential and current division." (p.13) Dr Pierce concludes that "We - ourselves and our others - are required to attend to what we can learn from Scripture, tradition and reason; we are no less required to listen to one another and look to the ways in which our communion with one another transcends our differences of conviction." (p.14)

The Anglican Way

The principle of 'Starting with Scripture' is well-founded in the Anglican tradition: "The Biblical texts provide a 'normative record of the authentic foundation of the faith'". (p.20) What makes Anglicanism distinctive in approaches to theological and ethical enquiry is how these studies are influenced by tradition and reason. "The Scriptures [...] must be read and understood, and their meaning grasped through a continuing process of interpretation". It has further been observed that, "Since the seventeenth century Anglicans have held that Scripture is to be understood and read in the light afforded by the contexts of 'tradition' and 'reason'. (p.20)

'Reason' in this regard being not only the ability to make sense of things, but also read the 'mind' of the culture in which the Church lives. The levels of interpretation in this area alone are considerable, but Dr Maurice Elliott brings some focus in introducing the word 'revelation'. He states, "that while Reason, Tradition and Experience are 'essential for experiential fullness as well as academic rigour', there can, "in the last analysis be only one final authority, and each of reason, tradition and experience must therefore bow before revelation". On revelation he states that as "the Scriptures have [...] recorded the content of God's self-revelation [...] it is essential to submit to their primary authority, or, to be more precise, to believe in God's authority as thereby exercised through the Scriptures."

However, as Dr Nigel Biggar has observed: "Scripture is not a manual of ethics. It does not furnish us with a coherent ethical system that can be applied to ethical problems to produce the right answer [...] of course [...] texts contain ethical principles and rules, and morally exemplary stories; and sometimes what one text says about moral matters is the same or similar to what others say. But not always." (p.25) He goes on to give us a picture: "By calling the truth, 'the Word of God', we signal that we ought to approach it, not as miners approach a coal face, but as pilgrims approach a shrine." (p.26).

We read Scripture 'through Christ', and, "He is the criterion by which every Christian affirmation has to be judged, and in the light of which it stands or falls" (p.26). (The quotation is that of N.T Wright from *Scripture and the Authority of God*).

A Changing Context

"Attitudes have become increasingly liberal on issues such as sex outside marriage, homosexuality and abortion. Present trends suggest, as with many other aspects of Irish life, that sexual culture

in Ireland is moving closer to that of the UK and continental Europe. Depending on the observer, this could be viewed as a positive or negative development, but it is undeniable that Irish attitudes to sex and sexual relations are changing, and changing quickest among younger people. Across the age range, Irish people are now more accepting of a greater range of sexual behaviour and orientations." (p.29). Quotation from: *The Irish Study of Sexual Health and Relationships 2006*). Whilst these conclusions of this report are nearly a decade old, and reflecting only one of the two jurisdictions covered by the Church of Ireland, few would deny their truth for the whole island in 2015 and the full Guide contains statistics that bear it out.

Human Sexuality and the Church of Ireland

In September 2003, the bishops of the Church of Ireland issued a pastoral letter indicating that a range of views over same-sex relationships was to be found within the Church of Ireland, and that 'this spectrum' was reflected in the House of Bishops. Four viewpoints were identified and each began with the words "The witness of the Scriptures is consonant with [...]". They range from "a view that rejects homosexual practice of any kind" to "the time has arrived for a change in the traditional position on affirming same-gender relationships." (*Two members of the Select Committee have undertaken to take "the witness of Scripture" and articulate different points of view in the main Guide pages 54-65*). Twelve years later, having been encouraged to listen and learn, the Church of Ireland membership is still grappling with this matter without a clear conclusion, though there have been significant developments. The Civil Partnership Acts of 2004 (UK) and 2010 (ROI) have had the effect on the Church of Ireland insofar as "equating civil partnership with marriage in respect to the pension rights of civil partners who register as such". (p.34)

More significantly, on 7th September 2011, the then Archbishop of Armagh, the Most Revd Alan Harper, issued a statement following the ceremony of civil partnership entered into by a serving clerical member of the Church of Ireland. In it he stated that this "presents a new situation within the Church of Ireland" but, whilst there are "differences of opinion within the Church, suggestions that we might split are, I hope, premature". The Archbishop concluded with these words: "Marriage is understood by the Church to comprise a lifelong and exclusive commitment by one man and one woman to each other. The Church has no provision or proposals for any liturgy of blessing of civil partnerships and there are no authorized public rites of blessing for same-gender relationships." (p.34)

Later, the Archbishop (in addressing the Standing Committee of General Synod) in re-iterating these views added, "I also wish to say that, as fellow human beings, homosexual people are entitled to be accorded the same respect and dignity as others." In speaking of such and the seeking of 'pastoral care' and 'moral direction' and 'God's transforming power' the Archbishop was at pains to observe equality with 'all other members of the Church of God'.

A further pastoral letter was issued by the House of Bishops in October 2011 promoting a 'framework for discussion' and shortly afterwards in March 2012 the 'Cavan Conference' attended by 450 members of General Synod, and other observers, began a newly energised process of discernment leading to the motion at General Synod later that May, mentioned above, and ultimately to the formation of the *Select Committee on Human Sexuality in the Context of Christian Belief* the following year and the engagement of all the dioceses of the Church of Ireland in Tripartite meetings, linking north and south, east and west.

The Select Committee Listening Process

In response to an advertisement in the Church of Ireland Gazette, during autumn of 2014, the Select Committee met with all who requested an interview, as part of a process of listening to those with experience of living with same-sex attraction, either personally or closely connected with those who would be so identified. This was a creative and deeply moving process or engagement that left no one unaffected, even those who did not take part in the actual interviews, but, as members of the Select Committee, had access to the type-scripts afterwards. Witness from parents with children searching for their true sexual identity was particularly powerful, indeed, almost overwhelming.

Whilst common themes emerged from the meetings, there were some sharply defined differences too as to the experience of gay Christians in their local church. Some, on moving parish, found that their treatment changed for better or worse, often according to the stance of the rector. Most referred to their expectation that, as gay men or women, they would be treated by the Church as they felt accepted under Christ, as one made in the image of God. A significant number said that they reached this conclusion after many years of struggling to come to terms with accepting their own sexuality, many experiencing suppression and denial, even marrying and having children, then later facing their inner journey again. It may be confidently predicted that there are many within the Church of Ireland with whom the hidden tussle is still in secret and, as such, they would not consider becoming part of this listening process. It is also clear that there is no single outcome; some accepting their orientation as of God, but with it coming the call to celibacy.

There was also testimony representing a very different point of view including a substantial and carefully argued submission highlighting a need to challenge an obsessively liberal viewpoint, whilst, in love and understanding it may be noted that it is "thoroughly Scriptural to regard homosexuality as essentially a form of bondage from which an individual needs to be released". (p.49) However, it was also stated that "Preaching and teaching against those with a gay or lesbian lifestyle is seen as creating a specific tension for young people with homosexual orientation to not only be part of the Church, but also to face their own life without revulsion at its extreme, or at the very least, confusion and a tendency to silence, anxiety and denial." (p.50)

Articulations by two members of the Select Committee

A key element to the Guide is the inclusion of two papers outlining the position of two members of the Select Committee who, taking the standpoint of the Scriptures, help us in our understanding of the ways of modelling Christian moral reasoning, but reach different conclusions. The papers are, of necessity, detailed and cannot be reduced to a satisfactory summary. Reference to the full Guide is therefore required to access these valuable additions to the work.



Dealing with Disagreement

As a Christian Church it is not only important that we come to the right conclusion, the means by which we get there is also important. Jesus summed up the law by emphasising relationships, so it is vital for the Church of Ireland to strive to find not just a resolution or a management solution to an 'issue', but to find the goal of transformation, focusing on the people involved and on all the relationships that exist across the areas of disagreement that we encounter. It is in loving God and our neighbour as ourselves that we will behave as God wishes, and we will grow together more fully into the image of Christ. (p.76-79)

