

**The Pilling Report: A Detailed Analysis by Christina Beardsley,
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1. Talking about same sex relationships in isolation

The Report of the House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality, chaired by Sir Joseph Pilling, was published on November 28th 2013.

http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1891063/pilling_report_gs_1929_web.pdf

This paper analyses and critiques each section of the Report in detail.

Prologue 'Living with holiness and desire' by the Revd Dr Jessica Martin

Jessica Martin's prologue 'Living with holiness and desire' surveys certain features of the contemporary context and offers a theological perspective on human relationships. It laments the commercialisation and idolization of sexual desire, and a commodified culture of instant gratification which impacts negatively on the vulnerable, especially children. Yet it is also hopeful, acknowledging the persistence of fidelity, despite this hostile climate, and the holiness of human relationships. The tone is both realistic and, in the proper sense, idealistic, thus making it a fitting preliminary to the main Report, and not least because what it outlines applies to everyone, heterosexual and homosexual. This is made very clear (emphases mine):

*'Is this a set of circumstances into which an Anglican bishops' Working Group on human sexuality', born out of a very specific set of anxieties about same sex relationships, can offer much? In looking at this one aspect of human sexuality we have discerned two basics. First, **that we cannot talk about same sex relationships in isolation. Culturally the whole issue is being made to bear more freight than it can or should possibly carry.** Second, that we cannot say anything about human sexuality without speaking first of our sense of the body and bodily relationships as holy. Christianity is incarnational: God and body come together in Christ. **Anything Christians might think about same sex relationships (especially as we have not discerned how to speak with a single voice on this topic) has no value except as part of this larger vision of all our human relationships; and for this reason the vision itself comes first, before we ever start talking about single-issue specifics.***

Sadly, these two 'basic' starting points are lost sight of in the rest of the Report, and it will be important to return to them and 'measure' the Report against them.

Part 1 Introduction

The establishment, membership and work of the group

The first section sets out the membership and terms of reference for the working group, along with a brief history of the listening process on human sexuality in the Church of England

(paragraphs 18-23) and the listening exercise undertaken by the working group (24-38). After a series of 'evidence days', when the group engaged with representatives from some of the organisations which had prepared submissions, there were also meetings across the country so that they could simply hear people's stories. The Report describes the latter constituency thus: *'The design team did not include any who had presented to our group's meetings – they were not chosen from among the lobby groups – and represented a diversity of people, lay and ordained.*

One can understand that the working party wished to 'get behind the arguments' – especially as these can often appear irreconcilable – by meeting with people who were not activists, but whose lives are affected by the issues. There is an attempt at fairness here as if they are saying: 'we not only spoke to the lobbying groups but to "ordinary people"'. I think it was a mistake, though, not to consult with the lobby groups about this, as these organisations, though fronted by well-known activists, are also in touch with hundreds of 'ordinary folk'.

Nevertheless, it is apparent from the summary – ten bullet points – of these informal meetings (paragraph 30), that the people the working party met with were fairly representative of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, lay and ordained and it is good to see the 'evidence' presented at this point. However, as with Jessica Martin's 'two basics', from a practical theology perspective, one would expect the issues raised here to be prioritised in the Report. Some of them are discussed later, of course, but these ten bullet points constitute an important marker or indicator of the Report's credibility with LGB&T people. How far has it addressed them? This is a subject I will return to in later posts.

One striking omission at this stage in the Report is that there is no corresponding summary of the submissions made by the 'lobbying groups', nor from the individuals listed at the end of the document. Even if the working group had reservations about these submissions, or decided to reject them, it would have been courteous, as part of a listening exercise, to acknowledge what had been said via this formal process, and why the working party chose to adopt a different approach.

This point is especially pertinent in relation to the submission from the Sibyls, Christian spirituality for trans people, which had noted that, although trans people are mainly concerned with gender identity, rather than sexual orientation, gender, sexuality, and spirituality are inextricably linked, and went on to highlight the predicament of married transsexual people who, at that time, prior to the passing of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act, could only obtain gender recognition by dissolving their marriage. This anomaly is a concrete, and highly emotive,

example of the interface between gender and sexuality as it affects trans people, but the working party chose not to address this, nor indeed, trans people's needs at all:

'This report focuses on questions concerning same sex relationships. However, the group believes that the experiences of those with transgender and intersex conditions raise important theological and pastoral issues. Some of these issues were outlined in chapter 7 of the 2003 House of Bishops report "Some Issues in Human Sexuality" and the Church of England needs to address them'.

(paragraph 38)

As the Report does not engage with the arguments of the Sibyls' submission as to why it was important to include trans people in the remit of the working party, one must assume that the decision was taken on the basis of the working party's meeting with transgender people, which it summaries thus:

'The issues raised by the transgendered people we encountered were not primarily about sexuality as such, but about feelings of shame and exclusion in relation to gender.'

Rachel Mann, who is one of the trans people – and one wonders how many others there were – the working party met with, has written that this is not how she remembers the conversation that she took part in

<http://therachelmannblogspot.blogspot.fr/>

This is worrying: for if that is true of one person's experience of the listening process undertaken by the working group, then perhaps it is true of others too, and that either they were misheard, or what they said has been misunderstood or is poorly reported. Whatever the reason it does not inspire confidence in a document that is dedicated to a review of the listening process on human sexuality.

There's another difficulty here, which the Report acknowledges (paragraph 72), namely that of power, especially the power of the institutional church. Apparently,

'Everyone from the Working Group felt that the listening exercise that it had engaged in was extremely worthwhile. They felt moved and privileged to listen to the stories that were shared with them on the listening days.' (paragraph 31)

and again,

'A number of members of the Working Group noted that they had been impressed by the quality of the relationships of the people they had met during the exercise and felt that this needed to be taken into account in any theological reflection on such relationships.' (paragraph 33)

Yes, one would hope that theological reflection would be based on experience, but comments of this kind can sound patronising because the conversation was one-sided; it was 'us', members of

the working group, listening to 'them', LGB&T people, which, of course, is how the listening process was set up. Lambeth 1.10 committed the Church to 'listen to the experience of homosexual persons'. (It also assured them that they are 'loved by God, and that all baptised, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are full members of the body of Christ'.)

It's clear from this initial listening exercise that the working group did not appreciate the implications of Jessica Martin's 'two basics', namely that the conversation about human sexuality in the Church of England can no longer be about 'us' and 'them', but has to be reciprocal. In my experience, LGB&T Christian people are used to telling their stories, in safe settings, but there is no safety where one group of people makes itself vulnerable by speaking honestly about themselves, while another group merely listens on. The time has come for the Church of England to facilitate a really grown up conversation about sexuality, and more importantly perhaps, human intimacy.

2. A Series of inconsistencies

A rapidly changing context

This is a curious section. The quotation from Archbishop Justin, with which it begins, and the text (paragraph 41) both acknowledge that the bishops lost the argument in Parliament, but it nowhere mentions that the government listened and 'heard' the 'Church of England's' opposition to same-sex marriage, granting to it and, to other religious bodies, the 'protection' of the quadruple locks which will make it illegal for CofE clergy to conduct same-sex marriages.

The equal marriage legislation, which will come into force in the spring is the context in which the Church of England will hold its facilitated conversations on human sexuality, but same sex marriage was not in the working party's terms of reference, so the report chooses only to note the fact that it is happening, but does so in odd ways.

For example, it says (paragraph 40) that the Church of England's submission on same sex marriage is itself an important document among recent church papers relating to sexuality, emphasising that it was discussed in draft by the Archbishops' Council and the House of Bishops before being signed off by the two Archbishops. Yet it is apparent, from the Archbishop of Canterbury's remarks, quoted at the head of the section, that the 'defeat' of that position in Parliament has led him to believe that 'there is a revolution in the area of sexuality and we have not fully heard it.' Likewise, the report itself acknowledges that 'many people in the Church ... now want to think again.' Similarly, given that their arguments did not convince the majority of

Peers, it is not at all obvious why ‘the speeches of bishops in the Lords [on the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill] constitute part of the evidence before us’.

One can’t help feeling that an attempt is being made to justify the status quo in the Church of England. For example, this observation arising from the fact that the working group was meeting at the same time as the parliamentary progress of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill:

‘It has demonstrated, if proof were needed, that difficulty in holding a reasoned debate about questions of sexuality is not confined to the Churches.’ (paragraph 43)

Well, most of the people I know who watched the Parliamentary debate on television were immensely impressed with its quality. There is also the really significant point that Parliament *has* debated the matter, but the Church of England has not, and the sentence that follows may reveal why:

‘In Parliament, in the media, and in many other forums, finding common ground has been elusive. It has often felt like a collision between incompatible world views, even without factoring in any religious dimension.’ (paragraph 43)

‘Finding common ground’ is a desirable goal, but in Parliament the primary aim was to thoroughly debate the issue, and establish a practical way forward based on the decision of the majority – which is how the General Synod tends to operate, albeit that reaching consensus is often given a higher priority than in party politics. The fear of ‘a collision between incompatible world views’ is a real one in the Church of England, and the report itself, with its Dissenting Statement by the Bishop of Birkenhead, demonstrates that. It is no surprise that GAFCON & FOCA are mentioned in this section as having contributed to a changed dynamic.

The report is honest in saying that there is an impression that ‘the Church itself often looks as if it wants to restrict debate’ (paragraph 45). That’s hardly surprising. There has been no Synod debate on the possibility of civil partnerships in church, even though some parishes have been keen to proceed. Indeed, that discussion was delayed so long that it has been overtaken by events, and equal marriage is now on the statute book.

It also notes (paragraph 45) that religious interventions are suspected of imposing revealed knowledge and authoritative teaching on others; which is also unsurprising given that the Church of England has achieved such extensive ‘protection’ within the equal marriage legislation that even those clergy who wish to officiate at the marriage of same-sex couples on church premises will be unable to do so.

Twice in this section we are told what amounts to the same thing:

'many others [in the Church] who would locate their views at the liberal end of the spectrum on same sex issues found themselves opposed to the proposals for same sex marriage, mainly on the grounds that they represented a confused understanding of equality and could be prejudicial to the meaning of marriage in society in general.' (paragraph 41)

and again,

'The debate on same sex marriage saw many liberally-minded Christians expressing reservations and opposition to the Government's proposals and to the public position of many prominent LGBT activists (in the Church and beyond).' (paragraph 49).

No examples or statistics are provided to support this claim. Is it meant to suggest that the Church of England is likely to be more divided on the issue of same sex marriage than Parliament was? Surveys do not seem to bear that out, but there is no mention of them. Given its remit, the working party decided to focus on the 'wider theological and ethical questions' rather than the specifics of same-sex marriage. The notion that theology and ethics can be 'detached' from concrete situations in this manner is a doubtful one, and particularly inappropriate in relation to human sexuality where experience forms an important basis for theological reflection.

In reviewing recent Church of England tradition, the report acknowledges the leading role played by Archbishop Michael Ramsey in homosexual law reform, and how the Church's outlook appears to have narrowed in the past few years in comparison. On the other hand, it recognises that some Evangelicals have been moving in a more affirming direction – and here it could have mentioned the change of direction by *Courage* and recent statements from Steve Chalk. There is the briefest mention of the significance of the advance of human rights for homosexual people, almost the only one in the report. The right to marry and to family life has become an increasingly important one for LGB&T people, but the report has chosen not engage with it.

At this point, the difficulties are piled up:

'although positions remain entrenched, there is movement [but] Despite these signs of movement, the depth of disagreement within the Churches has made it impossible for the issue to be resolved. There remains much pain on all sides.' (paragraphs 50 & 51)

This ignores the fact that the matter has been, or is being, resolved in other Provinces of the Communion, notably in North America. This too is a revealing sentence:

'It has become harder to occupy the middle ground of uncertainty and tentatively seeking after truth.' (paragraph 51)

Perhaps that's because we have reached the crisis moment when decisions need to be made, and the next paragraph hints at that, noting it was 'the unresolved nature of the issue' that led to the formation of GAFCON and FOCA.

The section ends by questioning the idea that 'the prevailing culture has "got it right"' (paragraph 53) about sexuality and homosexuality, noting that 'attitudes which, a few decades ago, seemed liberating have sometimes been revealed as having a dark and oppressive side which has shocked many.' It's hard to engage with a statement like that without more specific information about what is being described. As it stands, it sounds like the fear – which emerged previously in relation to civil partnerships, and that proved unfounded in that case – that equal marriage will have dire social consequences.

Paragraph 53 has some special pleading for the value of the 'honesty' of the Church's internal arguments about sexuality, and the following statement applies just as much to those who are intimidated by the apparent consensus of the Church of England's official position on human sexuality, as it does to those who are unconvinced by the rapidly changing social context - perhaps this was intended:

'Sometimes, apparent social consensus can themselves be excluding, making it hard for people publicly to express doubts, hesitations and disagreements.'

3. Listening, conflict and consensus

Listening to each other and continuing to do so

The House of Bishops Working Group was tasked to review the listening process on human sexuality, but this section of the report is somewhat self-referential. There's nothing wrong with that per se. The group have had to learn to listen to one another, and that has frequently been challenging (paragraph 55). At paragraph 56 we are told

'The episcopal members of the Working Group were chosen deliberately to reflect the range of views held within the Church of England on a topic which has proved deeply resistant to any form of compromise ... In many respects, our disagreements as a group are as deep as ever they were, and this is true of the wider Church also.'

It's worth noting that there were only four Episcopal members and, whatever the differences between them, three signed up to the main recommendations; only one dissented. That means there was 75% agreement – an extremely respectable majority: more than the two-thirds needed in the three Houses of General Synod for the Women Bishops' legislation to pass.

The four bishops are said to reflect a range of views (on sexuality/homosexuality?) in the Church of England, but if they represent the balance of those views in the House and College of

Bishops, and in the Church of England at large, then with such substantial consensus, the measure of disagreement may not be especially significant.

Paragraph 57 is a crucial admission:

'It is worth, at this stage, setting out the nub of the disagreement – the sticking point, as we understand it, which has prevented us from coming closer as a result of our deliberations. It turns, as has the Church's ongoing disagreement on questions of sexuality, on the meaning and authority of Scripture.'

Whether homosexuality is a discrete issue, or merely a 'presenting problem', related to the wider question of biblical interpretation, has been debated for some time. Here the Pilling Report seems to suggest that it is the latter: in which case the logical response would be to try to resolve the underlying matter of Biblical authority. Indeed, if that is the fundamental issue, it is unfair to lesbian and gay people to attempt to ask them to bear the pain of this unresolved tension at the heart of the Church's life.

That this is what is going on is confirmed at paragraph 59:

'To endorse the idea that the Church's understanding of the meaning of Scripture might change, seems, to some in the Church and on our Working Group, to be tantamount to denying that Scripture is authoritative to the Church and to open the door to relativistic readings of all scriptures.'

Yet the Church's understanding of the meaning of Scripture *has* changed – again and again: on cosmology, on the nature of faith, the person and work of Christ, slavery, the place of women. Such changes have been commonplace throughout the long history of the Christian Church. They may well have undermined certain literalistic readings of Scripture, but have usually served to reinforce the Bible's authority, and it is unfair to suggest that they have led inevitably to relativism.

According to paragraph 62:

'A belief that the Spirit is calling the Church to change is not, in itself, a reason to change if the mind of the Church is divided.'

But the Church is frequently divided. It rarely demonstrates unanimity on any issue. Change often happens though, whether we are ready for it or not, if the Spirit is leading.

The Report states that Christian leaders, especially bishops, have the duty of teaching and resolving disputed interpretations of Scripture, but then shies away from that lest it 'divide the Church irrevocably.' (Paragraph 63) This is very troubling: as if truth were to be avoided lest we all fall out. It is at this point that the Report becomes self-referential:

'As a group, we continue to seek the presence of Christ in one another. In the end, we are not prepared to say that our deeply held views render any of us un-Christian or put any of us outwith the Church of Christ. We commend to the wider Church a version of the process which we have found ourselves undergoing – attentive listening to brothers and sisters in Christ whose understanding of God's demands and our responses is very different from our own.' (Paragraph 65)

This process was evidently very meaningful for the working party, but it was mainly about hearing and understanding divergent ideas and interpretations, and that is said to be true more generally:

'wherever we have turned – whether to Scripture, theology, science, or social trends – we have encountered divided views, sincerely and prayerfully held. ... At many points, we have found that divisions are becoming more entrenched.' (Paragraphs 68 & 69)

This impression of equal and highly polarised positions may be just that: an impression rather than the reality. Achieving consensus may be easier than the Report suggests: at paragraph 70 it seems to confuse consensus with unanimity.

Acknowledging that gay and lesbian people have felt marginalised (paragraph 73) and unheard by the Church, and the fact of the Church's power, paragraph 72 states the Church must continue to listen to the theology and experience of lesbian and gay people. The group were also unanimous in their welcome to the presence and ministry within the Church of lesbian and gay people, lay and ordained (paragraph 73). Paragraph 76 is helpful too as a corrective to the dismissal of LGB&T identities in Christian contexts:

'Theologically, we recognize that, for Christians, their most fundamental identity is in Christ. But that does not mean that all the other identities which people bring to Christ are marginal or unimportant.'

Paragraph 77, on the other hand, seems to project the group's experience of trying to harmonise theological divisions on to the Church's listening process about sexuality:

'We believe that, notwithstanding the continued 'outsider' status felt by many gay and lesbian people in the Church, some (perhaps many) are confident enough in their theology and relationships, and in their new-found position of affirmation in society, for us to propose that they too might listen carefully and prayerfully to those who hold firmly to the Church's traditional teaching.'

No, what is needed is for everyone to begin to speak honestly about themselves, and the grace of God in sexuality and relationships, rather than the trading of familiar theological arguments.

Paragraph 78 is honest in admitting that the polarised, two-fold typology it has presented so far

is simplistic, but the second recommendation at paragraph 83 still goes on to talk about ‘deeply entrenched views [about sexuality] on both sides’ (my emphasis).

We are told at paragraph 76 that ‘care with words should, we believe, continue as part of the basis for the proposed process of continued listening.’ What then are we to make of a passage like this?

‘we do not regard the teaching of the Church as simply malleable or open to change without the most rigorous testing against Scripture, experience, and the mind of the Church. As we have discovered, that testing continues but has, so far, not demonstrated a case for change which all of us can accept.’

Malleable is an unusual word to use in this context, as if the Church of England’s teaching about homosexuality was somehow inflexible – which is how many perceive it. Surely, the rigorous testing of that teaching against Scripture and experience is primarily the responsibility of lesbian and gay people, given that it impacts directly on them? The notion of ‘demonstrating’ a case for change is also worth unpacking: what might a convincing demonstration actually look like?

There is a perception that for too long the legitimate needs of LGBT&T people in the Church have been ‘sacrificed’ for the sake of holding the Anglican Communion together. The facilitated conversations appear to reinforce this by their focus on resolving internal church politics, rather than addressing the effects of current teaching on lesbian and gay people. For example, paragraph 82 notes that ‘the impact of this issue on the unity of the Church suggests that it is far from being a marginal matter.’ The conversations also look like a delaying tactic. The Report denies this:

‘Any implication that a process of facilitated conversation is the equivalent of kicking the issues into the long grass and therefore need not be pursued with a sense of urgency, is to be resisted.’

Perhaps; but kicking things into the long grass is certainly what it feels like.

4. Continuing conversations and current teaching

The obligations of belonging to the Anglican Communion

Having been encouraged, in the previous section, to listen to one another, and to engage in a facilitated conversation about human sexuality, this section implies that the outcomes of that process are likely to be constrained by the role of the Church of England and the Archbishop of Canterbury within the Anglican Communion.

It illustrates this, at paragraph 90, by quoting Archbishop Robert Runcie’s Presidential Address at the 1980 Lambeth Conference, when it notes, without irony, that there were ‘tensions in the

Communion over the ordination of women to the episcopate'. As we are only too well aware, those tensions remain unresolved in the Church of England, while many other Provinces of the Communion have had women bishops for some time.

Moreover, in this Address, Archbishop Runcie argued that 'the real issue facing the Communion was not conflict over the ordination of women as such, but the bigger issue of the relation of independent provinces to each other.' This reinforces the point that sexuality is just the latest of several presenting issues indicative of an underlying problem. As this section indicates, the longed for interdependence of Provinces within the Anglican Communion has remained elusive. That being the case, it is unjust to make the conversation about human sexuality in the Church of England the test case for resolving the much larger, and long-standing, issue of the relationship between 'local' church autonomy and the identity and integrity of the wider Communion.

'Continuing conversations with the churches of the Communion' and 'ecumenical partners' are worthy goals, and even as I wrote this post, the Anglican Church of Canada announced a Commission which is to consult about changing the Church's marriage canon to allow same-sex marriage; and it's Roman Catholic partners are, as one might expect, keen to comment.

www.anglicanjournal.com/articles/marriage-canon-commission-members-announced

www.anglicanjournal.com/articles/anglicans-roman-catholics-committed-to-dialogue

Nevertheless, the principle of consultation is often inconsistently applied and, as the example of women bishops shows, it is only when Provinces have acted decisively, in the teeth of objections from other Provinces, that the opportunity has been created to learn from their experience as innovations have been tried and tested. Inhibiting change in the interests of unity, if strictly enforced, means there can be no experiment, and with no experience to draw on, no possibility of discerning the value or appropriateness of change.

The current teaching of the Church of England

What is striking about this teaching is just how recent it is. First to be mentioned is the 1987 General Synod motion on 'personal morality', which was an amended version of a Private Members Motion (PPM) tabled by the Revd Tony Higton. Many people signed that PPM so that the Synod could have two separate debates, one on its ministry to people with AIDS, the other on human sexuality. This was helpful in ensuring a compassionate discussion of the crisis posed by the HIV virus, but its unintended effect was an ill-prepared debate about homosexuality, and at a time when most gay members of Synod were too frightened to support the Revd Malcolm's sane, humane, and Christian alternative motion. Not only that, as the Report concedes:

'It is difficult to see how a resolution that is now 26 years old, on a subject that continues to be controversial, can still be said with any certainty to represent the mind of Synod.'

Issues in human sexuality (1991), which is mentioned next, is only four years younger, but even though it admitted that it was 'not the last word on the subject', that is what it has become, and the Report fails to mention the troubling fact that it is now imposed as a religious 'test' to which candidates for ordination (including Episcopal consecration) must submit, even though its claims are contentious, to say the least:

"Heterosexuality and homosexuality are not equally congruous with the observed order of creation or with the insights of revelation as the Church engages with these in the light of her pastoral ministry." (Quoted in paragraph 104)

The Report does include the important point, which is often overlooked, that although *Issues* inhibited clergy from 'entering into sexually active homophile relationships', laity for whom this is a conscientious decision 'must be respected, and ... the Church must not "reject those who sincerely believe this is God's call to them."' (Paragraph 105)

Next the Report summarises the Lambeth Conference Resolution 1.10 of 1998, then the Church of England's teaching on marriage, including the Book of Common Prayer Marriage Service and Canon B30, followed by *Marriage: a Teaching Document* of 1999, by way of background to the House of Bishops 2005 Pastoral Statement on Civil Partnerships, and the more recent Church of England submission to the government Consultation on same-sex marriage.

All these statements and teaching documents confirm that in recent years the Church of England – and in Lambeth 1.10, the Anglican Communion – has consistently maintained heterosexual marriage as its 'gold standard', but their tone varies depending on whether they were the product of considered reflection or a response to a crisis. *Marriage: A Teaching Document* (1999) is much the best, because its focus is on relationships, whereas the others are reactive and polemical: Lambeth 1.10 being especially notorious in this respect.

The Report's review of the Church of England's teaching reveals that it has been less consistent in its treatment of same-sex couples who believe that God has called them to live in union with one another. It is hard to see the genuine respect for their decision and relationship, envisaged in 1991 by *Issues in human sexuality*, in the statements of 2005 on Civil Partnerships and in 2012 during the government consultation on Same Sex Marriage.

The 2005 statement, itself quoting (at paragraph 115) the 1999 paper, *Marriage: A Teaching Document*, noted that, 'the Church of England teaches that "sexual intercourse, as an expression of faithful intimacy, properly belongs within marriage exclusively"'. Intriguingly this statement is

gender neutral and would perfectly 'accommodate' (to adapt an expression used in the Report) same sex marriage once it begins to happen in the UK, but of course equal marriage was not being contemplated at that date and is not what was envisaged.

Once it started to become a possibility other arguments have had to be found to restrict marriage to heterosexual couples. Gender complementarity is one of these, so in the Church of England's 2012 response to the government consultation on same sex marriage it says (quoted at paragraph 117) that 'the uniqueness of marriage – and a further aspect of its virtuous nature – is that it embodies the underlying, objective, distinctiveness of men and women.' Hence too, the title of the Faith & Order Commission report of 2013, *Men and Women in Marriage*, which is quoted next (paragraph 118). This simplistic account of gender has been widely critiqued and confirms that gender issues and transgender perspectives should be part of the conversations that flow from the report.

At this point the Report seems to run out of steam, and over the course of four paragraphs simply reiterates the 2005 Statement on Civil Partnerships ending, that it 'acknowledged that clergy "are fully entitled to argue" for a change in the Church of England's teaching about human sexuality. However, "they are not entitled to claim the liberty to set it aside simply because of the passage of the Civil Partnerships Act"'.

To continue to argue for change in an institution that seems so resistant to it, certainly calls for stamina! As for freedom of conscience, in the late 1970's I worked for a vicar – 'a good vicar' – who married divorcees when he thought this was appropriate, using a Superintendent's Licence in lieu of Banns. A liturgical traditionalist devoted to the Book of Common Prayer, he was part of a grassroots parish based movement for change of marital discipline and it was some years later before the Church of England leadership formalised what was happening on the ground. The quadruple locks will prevent clergy from adopting similar independent action in relation to same sex marriage, but there will be much that parishes can do to make couples feel welcome: let blessings abound!

5. Evidence and experience

Part 2 Summarizing the Evidence

I believe this part of the Report rests on a misunderstanding of what constitutes evidence in relation to sexuality and the conversation about homosexuality in particular. This is not to say that its sections do not include interesting material, but the effect is one of detachment from people's actual experience, including experience of life in the Church of England. The impression of objectivity and impartiality is often achieved by contrasting views that are rarely interrogated

with any rigour, and I will provide examples of this as I analyse these sections of the text in detail.

Sexuality, culture and Christian ethics

This first section repeats and develops some of the themes from Jessica Martin's prologue to the Report: the commercial and cultural sexualisation of children; sex and power, including sexual abuse; the nature of desire; the commodification of sex. One senses here, and elsewhere in the Report, (though not in Jessica's prologue) the hint of a suggestion that because the culture is flawed about sex generally, then perhaps it may be flawed in its affirmation of same sex relationships. It is only a hint, but I believe it to be there. For example, after noting that the darker side of 1960s sexual liberation only became evident later on – which 'the culture' itself is well aware of:

www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/booknews/6615552/Martin-Amis-the-sexual-revolution-killed-my-sister-Sally.html

– it is said (paragraph 128):

'To paint the trajectory of social trends concerning human sexuality as an inexorable progression to greater enlightenment is simply misleading. Insisting that the Church should catch up with modern mores and be 'relevant' begs many questions.'

The Report's anxiety, expressed earlier at paragraphs 53 and 63, that the Church might approve a social development that turns out to be misguided is never actually specified, but presumably relates to the legalising of same sex marriage. Yet the Church upholds marriage as the ideal and believes, on the basis of evidence, that it is the best way of supporting couples and family life. Surely, one would expect social benefit rather than social ill by extending it to gay couples? We are told too that 'the idea of covenantal relationships ... is increasingly counter-cultural' (paragraph 130), in which case it should be no surprise that lesbian and gay people who desire to live in such a relationship would look to the Church for support.

That the Church 'needs to catch up with the rest of society' has certainly been part of Changing Attitude, England's rhetoric, and I know I have used that phrase myself, but that is because we believe that we can see God at work in the culture as well as in the Church; and in the case of human equality, that God may be challenging the Church to live out a truth of the gospel by learning from the respect for difference and diversity that is evident in our culture's institutions. Here the Report's failure to engage with the theological implications of the human rights tradition is evident. Moreover, as H Richard Niebuhr's study *Christ and Culture* (1951) explained,

the relationship between the church and the world can take other forms than the 'Christ against culture' motif that seems to haunt this section of the Report.

That the contrast between a respectful, affirming society and an apparently hard-line Church is of growing concern to the leadership of the Church of England is apparent from the Archbishop of Canterbury's remarks quoted at paragraph 146:

'We have seen changes in the idea about sexuality, sexual behaviour, which quite simply [mean that] we have to face the fact that the vast majority of people under 35 think not only that what we are saying is incomprehensible but also think that we are plain wrong and wicked and equate it to racism and other forms of gross and atrocious injustice.'

Were the Church's current teaching on homosexuality to turn out to have been a necessary counter to an overly permissive culture that would settle the matter in the Church's favour, but as the Report concedes (paragraph 147): 'Christians cannot agree whether the current social trends are, broadly, to be affirmed and deepened, or contradicted with a sharply counter-cultural ethic – and, if the latter, which aspects of which culture are to be countered'.

Here again though, the Report would have us floundering in a sea of generality and vagueness when it ought to be specific and focused. At the beginning of this section it is stated, at paragraph 124, that 'most of our report is, as our remit required, about homosexuality', yet there is a tendency to talk about everything else but: singleness and celibacy, the role of children in the history of marriage, permanence and fidelity, mission and social change – the list goes on. These topics tend to be handled briefly, in a descriptive and episodic manner that is usually inconclusive. For example, much is said about marriage, but little about its history: ours is certainly not the first society to commodify sex by making 'the commercial contract ... the paradigm' (paragraph 129) for relationships.

In any case, as paragraph 148 acknowledges, most of its observations on these topics 'are as applicable to heterosexual as to homosexual relationships.' Why not then a single Christian ethic for both? The final paragraph hesitates to sanction that, on the basis of the uncertainty of reading God's plan in history, but then says it anyway:

'The Church stands increasingly apart from the dominant trends in culture when it upholds the virtues of permanence and fidelity in human relationships, and it is remarkable that so many, whatever their sexual orientation, seek to embody those virtues and see the Church as the community that can enable virtue to endure.'

It is 'Christ against culture' again, but this is probably the most hopeful statement I have come across so far in the Report in that it recognises the 'equality' between gay and straight couples

with regard to permanence and fidelity (as there is in relation to impermanence and infidelity). A later section will undermine that equality, but more of that another day.

6. Statistics and the Church's homophobia

Sexuality and social trends

It begins with the incidence of homosexuality in the UK. If I were researching this topic I think I would probably start with the Stonewall website. However, the working party chose 2012 data from an Office of National Statistics survey which suggests that 1.5% of the adult population self-identify as lesbian or gay, (4.5% cannot be categorised from the survey results), though it concedes that it this is inevitably only a snap-shot. The Stonewall website, by contrast, recognises that many studies underestimate the figures of lesbian and gay people, due to the legacy of criminalisation and discrimination, but that government actuaries estimate that 6% of the UK population are lesbian, gay or bisexual, approximately 3.6 million people. The figures are startlingly different, and because of the way the Report is constructed there is little discussion of the implication of the data – that will come much later in the third part, 'Reflecting on the Evidence.'

This section moves swiftly on to consider whether 'attitudes to homosexuality among Christians are wildly out of step with the rest of society' and whether 'the official teaching of the Churches is often at odds with the beliefs of their members (paragraph 154).' Many of the surveys and statistics included here have been widely disseminated, and some of the information is uncomfortable for the Church of England. For example, the YouGov poll of 2012 shows '55% of 18–24 year olds believing that language used to argue against same sex marriage encouraged homophobia (paragraph 156)', and that the number of Anglicans opposed to sexual relations between adults of the same sex almost halved between 1983 and 2010 (paragraph 157).

Troublingly, but not surprisingly, 'Those who attend services regularly are more likely to oppose same sex marriage and more likely to reject any legal recognition for same sex couples (158)', while the Crockett & Voas study, which is ten years old, noted 'a large, and growing, gap between the views of older and younger people, and ... between women and men (paragraph 161).'

The section ends with a brief conclusion, but there is no thought as to its implications at this point: 'we seem to be witnessing, over the last three decades, very rapid changes toward the inclusion and acceptance of homosexuality and homosexual people. The Churches are not immune from this trend (paragraph 173).'

Homophobia

This section opens with a quotation from the Archbishop of Canterbury's Presidential Address to General Synod of July last year, which shows that he understands that there is a strong impression that the Church of England's position, if not actually homophobic, certainly looks like that to other people. I have ambivalent feelings, however, about this section of the Report. There is some careful work of definition, and the distinction between institutional homophobia, internalised homophobia and social homophobia is useful, but as the document admits: 'Our group is well aware that the way we are constituted precludes us, in some people's eyes, from having any part in defining a term like homophobia since it is not a phenomenon which any of us have directly experienced at the receiving end.'

Quite; and the question has to be asked how a working group on homosexuality could be convened that did not include a single homosexual person. As has been said repeatedly since the Report's publication – this must be the last time this happens: 'no more talking about us without us!' It is all very well to claim 'that this working group, and the Church in its official and episcopal statements, makes a firm distinction between open debate on matters of personal and public ethics and hatred or bullying directed at gay and lesbian people whether by individuals or institutions (paragraph 186).' By their own admission, group members are in no position to know personally how these statements are received by lesbian and gay people. Changing Attitude, England has evidence that the Church's teaching is being applied in the most oppressive manner on the ground in some parishes; like the lesbian couple who were told that their child could only be baptised if they separated first.

Again, if I were researching homophobia I think I might have begun by consulting expert witnesses, like Stonewall. I would certainly have included at this point 'the voices' mentioned in the Report's Introduction at paragraph 30, and a brief summary is given at paragraph 184.

There is almost, but not quite, an admission that the Church might have 'exacerbated the reality and the threat of homophobia in society', and 'in so far as' this is so, a call to repentance. The Report also commends the Communion-wide 'Don't Throw Stones' initiative (paragraphs 189-191), and the Archbishop of Canterbury's commitment to combat homophobic bullying in schools is noted (paragraph 192), along with the National Society's initiative to help teachers and governors 'offer a safe environment for gay and lesbian pupils', though, rather chillingly, we are told, 'whilst also recognizing the teaching of the Church on homosexuality and marriage.' What we need to hear is how safe young LGB&T pupils actually feel when presented with the Church's current teaching on these subjects.

The main omission from this section of the Report is any consideration that the Church of England could be, or is, as many LGB&T people believe it to be, institutionally homophobic. It would be very easy for the Church of England, with its links to government, to instigate an independent review to establish whether or not this is the case. There is, for instance, no comparison between the implementation of equal opportunities for LGB&T personnel in the armed services or the police in the United Kingdom, and the experience of LGB&T clergy in the Church of England, with its exemptions from UK equality legislation and the continuing requirement of clerical celibacy for clergy in same sex relationships.

What too of transphobia? The Report has nothing to say about that because it has decided not to consider the needs of transgender people, but homophobic and transphobic hate crime are closely linked. Very often it is gender variant behaviour rather than anything overtly sexual that attracts bullying and violence, which is another reason why trans voices also need to be heard in the forthcoming facilitated conversations.

7. Unscientific obfuscation

Arguments about science

The first subsection here is the question, 'Are human beings sexually dimorphic?' The working group received presentations from Dr John Hare and Dr Susannah Cornwall (her surname is spelt incorrectly here in the pdf version of the Report I am using), who have both written on the theological implications of people with intersex conditions. However, no conclusions to this important question are offered at this point. This might be due to the structure of the Report, which postpones reflection until later, but I am not aware that it ever returns to it, and the question is left hanging, unless we are meant to draw our own conclusion from the reference (paragraph 197) to intersex conditions affecting 'a small minority of people'.

It is true that relatively small numbers of people are affected by the specific intersex conditions noted in that paragraph, but, to quote my collaborator, Michelle O'Brien, who has written extensively in this field, 'The numbers concerned are usually influenced by the person's definition of what is genuinely intersex; The broader view places estimates as high as 2% of the population; the narrow view is that intersex is very rare. Many people do not know that they are intersex, as this was kept from people for many years.'

Paragraph 198, the only detailed reference in the Report to transsexual people, claims that, 'Unlike people with intersex conditions, their bodies are unambiguously either male or female'. Although generally true this is not always the case. For example, during gender reassignment surgery a gonad of the opposite gender is sometimes discovered in the body of someone who

was assumed to be of 'unambiguous' gender. However, the Report is not simply inadequate in its discussion of intersex and transgender people, but in what it has to say about the subject of gender more generally, which is a serious weakness.

Paragraphs 199 & 200 address the question, 'Is sexual attraction fixed and immutable' to which the answer appears to be, 'for some people it is, but not for all.' The 'causes of homosexuality' comes next. It's interesting to note – to quote a parallel example – that in the care of transgender people, aetiology is now considered largely irrelevant and the emphasis is on dealing with the reality rather than how it came about. The sources quoted by the Report emphasise that the causes of homosexuality are multi-factorial, which is also the case with transsexualism, and, as the Report accepts (paragraph 204), so is most human behaviour and experience.

The next three questions are, frankly, embarrassing. I had assumed that the working group had been exposed to sufficient evidence from their meetings with lesbian and gay people to convince them that the answer to the first question – 'Is homosexuality harmful or is harm the result of social prejudice?' – must be the latter, but no: 'a causative link between social prejudice and health issues among gay and lesbian people is neither proven nor ruled out by the evidence.' What evidence? The Core Issues Trust's quibbles over three papers cited by the Royal College of Psychiatrists quoted in this section? A visit to the PACE website tells a very different and harrowing tale:

'There are some problems that LGBT people face, such as discrimination, intolerance and harassment that may increase their risk of suicide. This is especially true for young people. One study found that young lesbian, gay and bisexual people were more than three times as likely as their straight peers to report having seriously considered suicide in the last year, while another found that nearly half of young transgender people had seriously considered suicide.'

www.pacehealth.org.uk/files/5213/6068/9543/Feeling_Suicidal.pdf

And to imply that 'homosexual orientation "and all it entails cuts against a fundamental, gender-based given of the human condition, thus causing distress"' (paragraph 208), in a Report that gives such limited consideration to gender is almost laughable. What if the notion of a 'fundamental, gender based given' to human nature is itself a social construction that is part of the problem, as many feminists would argue?

The second question as to 'the durability and stability of same sex relationships' introduces the old stereotype that gay relationships are short-lived, accompanied by the now familiar disagreement from the Core Issues Trust about the papers submitted by the Royal College of Psychiatrists. On this limited basis, the working group concludes that there is an 'absence of

compelling evidence one way or another' and so adopts 'a neutral stance.' I'm sure that Changing Attitude, England would be only too glad to introduce the working group to lesbian and gay couples whose relationships have lasted decades, but that might be confusing for them, as it would question the notion that the homosexual person is strange and other, whereas 'the evidence' is that some people, gay or straight, maintain monogamous, life-long relationships, and others do not: simple really.

The third question, 'are sexual orientation change efforts [SOCE] effective or do they do harm', masks, as the Report admits, 'a more fundamental divergence of opinion over whether seeking to reduce or overcome same sex attraction is a legitimate activity.' The Royal College of Psychiatrists is in no doubt 'That this can be deeply damaging ... and ... there is no evidence that such change is possible (paragraph 215). This should be conclusive, but no, we are told that the effectiveness of such therapy remains uncertain because of the lack of 'randomized, controlled trials', and that in their absence we have to rely on such studies as exist and on 'anecdotal evidence'.

The Report seems to have forgotten what it informed us, at paragraph 49, that one of the biggest US players, 'Exodus International – dedicated to helping people overcome same sex attraction has decided that their activities caused harm and ceased that aspect of their ministry.' UK based group Courage has also done the same. These examples are significant evidence that SOCE is increasingly discredited as an effective therapy. This is not to say that some individuals are not helped by it, but they are a tiny minority.

It's worth recalling, as the section ends, that its subject was meant to be scientific arguments about homosexuality, though the scientific evidence seems incredibly thin. An assessment of its significance is promised in Part 3, which I will consider at that point.

8. The Bible, Sex and Love

Arguments about Scripture

At eight pages this section is relatively short. Frustratingly, like much that precedes it in Part 2, it is hard to see why the contents have been included under 'evidence'. This particular section reads more like a summary of the authors' methodology.

It begins at paragraph 220, with a bold statement, followed by the usual disclaimer that views on these topics are polarised:

'On two things concerning Scripture and sexuality, almost everyone is agreed: the Bible contains no positive depictions of, or statements about, sexual activity between people of the same sex, and

Jesus himself is not recorded as mentioning the subject at all. But the significance of these two facts, and of other questions of scriptural interpretation on the subject, is deeply contested.'

Jesus' silence on this matter is striking, but I would question whether the small number of texts that are thought to condemn sexual activity between people of the same-sex is the right place to begin this discussion about Scripture. That the Report does so follows from its reluctance to engage with the contemporary context, where people of the same sex have chosen to live in civil partnerships, and with the prospect of marriage drawing ever closer.

By eschewing what, for practical theology, would be the appropriate starting point, namely the love and commitment of the couple, the Report has focused on the secondary issue of sexual activity. This is a fundamental category error, and to some extent renders rather pointless the lengthy discussions of the 'sexual' biblical texts by the Bishop of Birkenhead and the Revd David Runcorn, which appear as appendices (and which I might at a later date, and if time permits, review on this site).

Runcorn approaches Scripture broadly, drawing attention to the significance of biblical concepts of 'Covenant and Friendship' (page 193) for same sex relationships, while Bishop Sinclair cites David and Jonathan, and Ruth and Naomi, but only to question their relevance to this subject by claiming that 'There is no example in Jewish first-century thought of the stories ... giving hermeneutical tools for affirming same sex relationships among their pagan contemporaries.' Both these narratives have become popular in gay, lesbian and queer theology, though, not because they are sexually explicit, but because of the beauty of the love between the two protagonists. In the case of David and Jonathan this love is almost classically 'Platonic' – a love 'surpassing the love of women'; in other words a love that is spiritual and not 'degraded' by such earthly matters as copulation and childbirth. It's a perspective that belongs to the 'ancient' context of the text, but what makes it attractive to couples today, like the loyalty of Ruth to Naomi – 'where you will go, I will go' – is the depth of fidelity and meaning in these examples of covenanted love.

We see this category error at work, alarmingly, at paragraph 233 which says

'We have been alert to the problem of begging the question – arguing perhaps that, because God is against homosexuality all the Bible texts must be read that way, or that, because God is love, texts which appear to question the sexual expression of love by homosexual people must be mis-readings – but we have sought to dig deeper than this.'

But there is no Scriptural equivalence between a statement like 'God is against homosexuality' (which sounds uncomfortably like 'God hates fags') and the statement 'God is love' which has

unequivocal biblical warrant. The Report shows no appreciation of the possible link between the Scriptural texts that are said to condemn homosexuality and the homophobia which it has tried to elucidate in an earlier section. Not for nothing are these passages referred to as 'terror texts': they have been used to strike fear into the hearts of LGBT people.

Basic principles concerning the use and abuse of the Bible are being missed here. The biblical texts that are said to relate to homosexuality are not merely matters for gentlemanly debate: lesbian and gay people's lives and souls are at stake here and it is vitally important that these matters are clarified. There is also considerable imbalance in privileging the Sinclair and Runcorn papers – both men are Evangelicals – as the Report acknowledges. This is the reason given:

'We include these two contributions, not because they sum up the whole range of scriptural scholarship on this subject – they emphatically do not – but because they epitomize the way in which study of the same sources can lead to very different conclusions.'

It's a rather limited aim, though consistent with the ethos of polarisation that the working group is keen to insist is prevalent in the Church at large as well as in its midst. What is needed, though, at this point is precisely a wide range of evidence, especially gay, lesbian and queer theology, so that this case can be heard. The brief literature review, paragraphs 227-232, is woefully inadequate in this respect, and I would commend *The Gay Gospels* by my fellow Changing Attitude, England Trustee, Dr Keith Sharpe, for a comprehensive and succinct account of non-heterosexist readings of these passages.

<http://books.changingattitude.org.uk/browse-by-title/t/the-gay-gospels-good-news-for-lesbian-gay-bisexual-and-transgendered-people/>

Furthermore, we use frameworks of this kind – such as 'God is love' – to interpret Scripture all the time; not to do so would leave us in a quandary of indecision about the meaning of the Christian faith, (and the next part of the Report will consider this interpretative task from an Anglican perspective). Asked by a pushy reporter to summarise the contents of his massive *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth was able to reply simply and briefly, 'Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so.' Perhaps the 'tensions' (paragraph 222) experienced by the working group over biblical interpretation would have been reduced, if loving relationships, rather than sexual activity, had been kept in focus.

The section ends with some reflections (rather than evidence) about the authority of the Bible, and a discussion of translation problems, cultural meanings in Scripture, and finally, somewhat randomly, male and female in the Genesis narrative.

It is apparent from paragraph 234 that the working group has chosen to 'accommodate' what comes across as a highly literalist account of Scripture on this subject, though one suspects that this literalism is unlikely to be consistently applied across the whole of life by those who advocate it in relation to homosexuality. The working group as a whole do not share that outlook.

'But we do not all believe that the evidence of Scripture points to only one set of ethical conclusions. In short, Christians who share an equal commitment to Scripture do not agree on the implications of Scripture for same sex relationships.'

However, what they fail to see is that by maintaining the current teaching they effectively reinforce a single ethical position based on a literalist reading of Scripture.

The problem of translating *arsenokoites*, a rare Greek word used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 6.9 and 1 Timothy 1.10, which is discussed next, is certainly 'academic' compared to the impact of modern translations in fostering hatred against LGBT people. The lazy way translators repeat unwarranted translations of key words in the 'terror texts', and how these terrible meanings, foreign to the original setting, were imposed by later generations, are explored exhaustively in K. Renato Lings brilliant, *Love Lost in Translation: Homosexuality and the Bible* (2013), which probably appeared to late for inclusion in the Report but ought to be required reading.

<http://books.changingattitude.org.uk/browse-by-title/1/love-lost-in-translation/>

On cultural meanings in Scripture, it is noted that David Runcorn's claim '*this is not that*' – that references to homosexuality in the Bible refer to a very different phenomenon from the one we know today – is questioned by Keith Sinclair, who suggests that faithful, equal same sex relationships may well have been known to Paul. The Report recognises that this debate must remain inconclusive since we can't even be sure what Paul meant, though one senses (at paragraph 245) a presumption that Paul believed them to 'contradict God's purposes for humanity.'

Cue 'Male and female in the Genesis narrative.' Yes, it's gender! The Report has avoided any serious engagement with this issue, but it emerges here, in a form that recent Church of England documents seem comfortable with: Genesis 1.27 & 2.18-24. The former, we are informed, implies the equality of male and female before God; the latter the significance of companionship, along with 'the priority of the male.' (Yes, it really does say that).

Somewhat inelegantly, God's purposes in creating men and women are defined as procreation and companionship (paragraph 250). Not only that, we are told that 'One passage cannot be abandoned in favour of the other and so, in seeking to elicit the implications for marriage and

partnerships, both sexual difference and human companionship are significant. Neither tells us the whole story without the other (paragraph 251).’ Now that is surprising. Up until now we have been told how complex the interpretation of Scripture is and that Christians are divided over it, but no:

‘We can say with confidence that the created nature of humanity as male and female is built into that natural order, and also that human beings are intended to live in relationship with others.’

Very comforting, I’m sure, for the heterosexual majority, but hardly good news if you happen to be lesbian and gay. To use a recurring phrase from this section, ‘begging the question’ indeed!

9. Plugging the theological gap

Perspectives from two theologians

We are told that the presentations to the working party by Father Timothy Radcliffe OP and Professor Oliver O’Donovan made a deep impression and the papers they wrote are quoted in this section. They are best described as opinion pieces, and unusually for this Report, the two contributions are not presented as irreconcilably opposed to each other; in fact there is a certain measure of agreement between them.

They are included here because the authors of the Report know that it lacks a theological framework, and they explain their reluctance to attempt one at paragraph 255:

‘Given the lack of theological common ground in the existing literature, among our many respondents, and in our own group, the first approach [a synthesis of what has appeared earlier in the Report] is likely to be banal and the second [articulating our own view] to (mis)use theology to attempt foreclosure on the wider arguments.’

Actually, as the authors acknowledge, a theological synthesis to underpin their recommendations is exactly what the Report needs at this point. Their reasons for not providing it do not hold up. Yes, there is much evidence of argument and disagreement in what they have reported so far, but that does mean that consensus is completely lacking or impossible, albeit a minority might oppose it. This is, after all, the current position with regard to women bishops in the Church of England. Nor would it have ‘foreclosed’ arguments had the working party decided to develop a theological understanding of its own on the basis of its research: it would have demonstrated commitment and, perhaps, provided a way forward. Having decided not to do this, Father Radcliffe and Professor O’Donovan were chosen to fill the gap.

Timothy Radcliffe

There is something hugely refreshing about Father Radcliffe’s belief, ‘that for most of the Church’s history, sexual conduct has neither been a major concern nor understood primarily in

terms of rules. ... my suspicion is that both this obsession with sex and a stress on rules (are) both relatively late and alien to traditional Christianity' (paragraph 257). This tends to confirm my own conviction that although the Church of England's teaching on sexuality is often referred to as being 'traditional', it is actually relatively modern.

Also refreshing is Father Radcliffe's emphasis on embodiment and vulnerability in his Eucharistic sexual ethic (paragraphs 258-260), and likewise, to some extent, his insight into macho culture:

"Wounded male pride cannot bear to show vulnerability... Until recently, homosexuality was seen as effeminacy and so buried and hidden. This sometimes led to concealment and dishonesty."

(Paragraph 261)

It would be interesting to know what was said in the missing text. The middle sentence highlights an interface between sexuality and gender, though the impression is of homosexuality as a peculiarly male 'problem'; or, perhaps, that problematizing homosexuality is itself an aspect of masculinity.

His way of framing the issue is also welcome:

'How does all this bear on the question of gay sexuality? We cannot begin with the question of whether it is permitted or forbidden!'

Instead, the measure is to be his Eucharistic sexual ethic:

'We must ask what it means, and how far it is Eucharistic. Certainly it can be generous, vulnerable, tender, mutual and non-violent. So in many ways I think it can be expressive of Christ's self-gift.'

However, this hopeful perspective is suddenly narrowed by the concepts of fecundity and fertility. Father Radcliffe appreciates that fertility can be understood metaphorically, and platonically, 'Biological fertility is inseparable from the fertility of our mutual tenderness and compassion. And so that might seem to remove one objection to gay marriage (paragraph 267)', but then he continues:

'I am not entirely convinced, since it seems to me that our tradition is incarnational, the word becoming bodily flesh. And some heterosexual relationships may be accidentally infertile in this sense, but homosexual ones are intrinsically so.'

As presented here then, 'the marriage equals procreation' paradigm trumps the theological exploration that has preceded it, though it is unclear whether the comments about the 'proposed legislation for "gay marriage"' at paragraph 268 are those of Father Radcliffe or the authors, but the impression is one of opposition to the current proposals. Given that the second theologian is

Professor O'Donovan, whose views on homosexuality and transsexualism are known to be conservative, one must question the authors' statement that 'we have sought to engage with theologians who have interesting new things to say and who are not readily co-opted to support any one position within the church's current disputes.' (Paragraph 256)

Oliver O'Donovan

This subsection opens (paragraph 270) by noting that 'Professor O'Donovan began by reminding us of the Socratic wisdom of 'knowing how much we do not know.' The irony here is that, unlike the working party, attraction between people of the same sex was a subject that Socrates knew extremely well, from his own, albeit well-managed, experience. The paragraph continues that Professor O'Donovan

'recognized that "certainties about the sexual phenomena of our time are few" but he believed that some of the phenomena are new: "The human race has often seen homosexual behaviour before, in a variety of contexts; but it has not seen anything like this construction of it, with these sensibilities and aspirations."

So in this 'this is not that' debate, discussed in the previous section (paragraph 244), O'Donovan does not regard modern homosexuality as the same phenomenon as same sex attraction and behaviours in the ancient world. There *is* consensus about this. Many scholars believe that the rise of a modern sexual identity did not begin until the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century. In the ancient world, certainly, and well beyond – Shakespeare for example – same-sex attraction and behaviour was a possibility for men, many of whom, like Socrates, were also married, and did not entail the stigma that it does today. Indeed, in the Socratic/Platonic tradition it is, when restrained by appropriate asceticism, the gateway to eternal beauty and love.

However, I think O'Donovan is mistaken in his claim that the modern construction of homosexuality is totally new: the work of James Boswell, and more recently, Alan Bray, demonstrates otherwise. Indeed, Bray's *The Friend*, shows that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries middle class English men and women entered into marriage-like relationships that were publicly acknowledged.

In any case, many gay and lesbian couples in our generation and preceding ones have lived for decades as if married, so there is no need to worry about whether marriage is a 'plausible analogy' (paragraph 271): the new legislation will simply allow them to regularise the reality of their situation, as civil partnerships have already done to some degree. Nor will 'several

generations' be needed for observation, as if this were some strange novelty; one need only get to know some of these faithful couples.

Next we are introduced – or, for those who are familiar with the document *Men and women in marriage* published last year – reacquainted, with the notion of 'pastoral accommodation': 'a response to some urgent presenting needs, without ultimate dogmatic implications', which will enable the Report to sanction blessings for same sex couples by those clergy and parishes that wish to do so. The professor's analogy here (paragraph 276) is an unfortunate, and potentially offensive one: a prayer following abortion turned down by General Synod lest it appear to invoke God's blessing on abortion, even though the prayer itself acknowledged the sorrow that a life was taken. The reality is that some clergy and chaplains in that situation have to turn to other resources (*Human Rites* for example), as they do in order to celebrate the love of a lesbian or gay couple in the absence of anything from the Church of England. The Report is not proposing the issuing of authorised texts for the latter in order to avoid potential doctrinal consequences, and thus sunders the pastoral and the doctrinal in what seems a most un-Anglican manner.

O'Donovan's 'reservations about the concept of identity' (paragraph 276) apply to everyone of course, and his 'conclusion', which advocates a provisional, pragmatic approach prepares us for the remaining recommendations which emerge in Part 3, 'Reflecting on the Evidence'.

10. A Moot point

Part 3 Reflecting on the Evidence

Christian ethics – the Anglican tradition

This first section is mainly an account of classic Anglican theological method, which accords primacy to Scripture while recognising that it is also complementary and dialogic with the insights of reason and tradition (paragraphs 282-308). This primacy means that *'when thinking how to respond to the changes in sexual ethics and practice that have taken place in our society, the Church of England must give highest regard to the teaching of the Scriptures. It further means that it would not be legitimate for the Church of England to require anything in terms of its belief and practice that was obviously contrary to the Scriptures.'* (Paragraph 289)

For those Christians who believe that Scripture is unambiguous in its condemnation of homosexuality that, presumably, is the end of the discussion. The Report, however, expects the three strands to be held together, and after distinguishing between scriptural primacy, and the view, to which it has respectfully listened, that tradition and reason should be subordinated to a single reading of the Bible, it concludes:

'To make one reading of Scripture definitive in that way would, in effect, make one wing of the Anglican family the sole arbiter of Anglican ethics and bring an end to the conciliar approach which has for so long characterized Anglicanism.' (Paragraph 318)

It is acknowledged that despite, or maybe because of this conciliar ideal, Anglican debate (paragraph 303) particularly around sexuality (paragraph 304) has been 'fractious' in character, but it is not apparent from the Report that the working party has reckoned with how unsafe LGB&T people can feel in church settings, and that much work will be needed to reassure them on this point if they are to participate in the facilitated conversations as proposed. There is recognition, at paragraph 305, that 'when the different ethical stances represent people and traditions and not just theories, disagreement can call into question the very identity and belonging of the protagonists', but there is no practical advice on how to manage that.

As a pupil of Dr Kathleen Bliss, who worked closely with J.H. Oldham, I was pleased to see his contribution to Anglican social ethics acknowledged (paragraph 306). Oldham is famous for promoting 'the Moot' which brought together intellectuals from 'various disciplines and expertise', to consider education, social reconstruction and culture. One can understand the attractiveness of this model for the working party, as it begins to articulate the facilitated conversations, but the working party itself might have benefitted from a more Moot-like diversity by including more scientists, social scientists, historians, theologians and biblical scholars in its membership: it was a very small group.

More seriously, there is a complete failure to appreciate the history of current Church of England and Anglican teaching about homosexuality.

'Most of all, Anglican social ethics is characterized by listening to each other within the church. If one emphasis in theological ethics is allowed to dominate all others, the whole nature of Anglicanism, as a conciliar Church which holds together distinctive traditions, is lost.' (Paragraph 308).

The reality is that the Church of England's teaching on homosexuality is based on a General Synod Private Members Motion debated in 1987 at the height of the AIDS crisis in the UK, following the sidelining of a report published in 1979, the work of 12 scholars under the chairmanship of the then Bishop of Gloucester, John Yates. To quote from the Independent's obituary: 'Yates's report was learned in its discussion of the references in scripture as well as the developments in psychology and legal reflection. ... Lambeth conference resolutions and discussions appear naïve when compared with the nuanced and learned conclusions of the "Gloucester report".' It is also notorious that Lambeth Conference Resolution 1.10 of 1998,

which has become the touchstone of Anglican teaching on this matter, did not reflect the careful work of its subsection report on human sexuality, which again was sidelined by the Conference; while the report of a later Church of England working party, chaired by June Osborne, which completed its work in 1989, was only published two years ago, in 2012.

<http://www.thinkinganglicans.org.uk/archives/005323.html>

The Church of England and the Anglican Communion do not have a good track record for handling diversity. As these examples show, the pattern has actually been ‘for one emphasis in theological ethics ... to dominate all others’, and some of us will need a lot of convincing that it will not be repeated this time around. It is also naïve to claim that

‘The Anglican approach to social ethics is profoundly Christian in its refusal – in theory if not always in practice – to countenance premature foreclosure on matters where discerning the mind of the Church and the mind of Christ is elusive.’

Maintaining current teaching, as the Report claims to do, is itself an act of foreclosure.

Scripture and theology

This section advocates prayer as well as the commitment to listening to those with whom one disagrees (paragraphs 309, 310), but the reluctance to foreclose, or more accurately, to close the argument continues:

‘In the face of conflicting scholarship, as well as conflicting beliefs, we believe that the Church should be cautious about attempting to pronounce definitively on the implications of Scripture for homosexual people.’ (Paragraph 311)

That does not make the problem go away, and it will be LGB&T people who must continue to live with the consequences. There is a small concession, but note that it is negatively expressed:

‘We do agree that, as all Christians are called to faithfulness, exclusivity and life-long commitment in their sexual relationships, same sex relationships which do not seek to embody those aspects of vocation cannot be right.’ (Paragraph 311)

The conversations with Fr Radcliffe and Professor O’Donovan are recalled to justify the Report’s caution, while opting for a pastoral accommodation to address a ‘morally ambiguous’ situation which includes the unresolved significance of procreation in human relationships (paragraphs 313-315). The emphasis is to be on process rather than propositions (paragraph 316), though there will, in fact, be plenty of the latter when the further recommendations are listed. The section ends by declaring ‘that our most important conclusion is that the conciliar processes of Anglican ethics should be enabled to continue in a more structured and focused manner’, meaning, presumably the facilitated conversations.

So homosexuality is, for the Report, 'a moot point', in that it is to be determined by an assembly of the people, even though this is not how the Church of England, synodically governed and episcopally led, normally deals with these matters. But 'a moot point', can also be one which is potentially debatable but no longer practically applicable, and this sense too seems appropriate: for while the Church of England plans for conciliar conversations about homosexuality, for all practical purposes, elderly peers in Parliament, like the majority of young people, are agreed that this is simply not an issue any more.

11. I may sound homophobic but ...

Countering prejudice and homophobia

At paragraph 320 the Report refers to homophobia as a 'vexed' term, hinting, I think, at its alleged use to silence those who disagree with LGB&T equality. As I have said already, and as the Report admits, it is difficult for the working party to understand what it feels like to be on the receiving end of homophobia (some straight people have done so by declaring themselves to be gay in situations where they were unknown, and observing if they were treated any differently). What the Report is certain of is 'that the hatred, prejudice and exclusions experienced by LGBT people continue and are utterly contrary to Christ's command that we should love our neighbour as ourselves.'

There is special pleading though in the suggestion that 'because the Church's approach to sexual ethics is not framed in terms which are identical to the predominant cultural viewpoint and are often misunderstood, it is important for the Church to make its stance absolutely explicit.'

However, there are various cultural viewpoints in our society, including homophobic ones.

Currently, there are legal protections in place for LGB&T people: the Church has almost always negotiated exemptions from them. If the Church's teaching and practice has been assumed to be homophobic it is hardly surprising, especially if the connection between that teaching and Christ's command to love our neighbour is hard to discern.

That Church discussion of sexuality has failed to reflect Christ's own teaching is acknowledged, but then we are told, at paragraph 322, 'This is not to suggest that the Church must always adopt the language and values of secular society or accept uncritically the views and culture of any group on its own terms because it is a minority which has suffered the prejudices of a majority.'

True, but Christ's ministry in the gospels and the Church's practice across the ages has demonstrated compassion and concern for those who are marginalised. This is part of the Christian's DNA and people are rightly troubled and perplexed when it appears to be lacking.

I would have welcomed a firmer repudiation of homophobia and a call for repentance by the Church at this point. It comes later at recommendation 5 (page 102) though it is still the Church repenting for 'homophobic attitudes it has failed to rebuke' rather than its own homophobia. At this point the Church's failure is met with the – much softer – call to greater listening (paragraph 323). The Report though does acknowledge the contrast between Christians' claims that they are marginalised and the prejudice experienced by lesbian and gay people, as well as the power imbalance arising from 'the long history of Christianity's dominant position in wider culture' (paragraph 324).

Intemperate or careless talk is inappropriate for another reason: 'we cannot fail to be aware that Anglican Christians in some countries have been subject to violence and intimidation because of others' perceptions about what Anglicans believe about homosexuality.' This is true, but nor can we condone homophobia in one country on the ground that challenging it might insight attacks on Christians in another. Both are equally abhorrent.

Paragraph 327 states, somewhat late in the day, that

'The debate within the Church focuses on divine and human love. What does a loving creator God ask of his people? What does the love of Christ mean for fallen humanity? What does it mean to love selflessly in our human relationships and in the communities we inhabit?'

These are questions that the Report itself should be trying to address. It continues

'All sides in the debate have, at times, lost sight of that focus on love or allowed it to be obscured in the way we speak to one another.'

Perhaps, but the next suggestion is a step too far:

'But it remains that, where that imperative of love is being faithfully and prayerfully pursued, it is inappropriate to apply the term 'homophobic' to the conclusions which may be drawn, even if they are interpreted by some as scandalous or offensive.'

In other words, I can condemn you to hell then for your lifestyle – this is said regularly, apparently, by their 'Christian' cleaner to friends of mine – if I do so lovingly and with prayerful intent. No, it is simply not possible to excuse people in this way if others perceive their words as scandalous or offensive. In those circumstances, as with my friends' cleaner, (though I doubt that she ever thinks about this as she irons their shirts), enduring contact or relationship depends on the goodwill of the person you have offended. Amazingly – and God's call seems to be the only explanation – the Church of England can depend on the goodwill of its many LGB&T parishioners and clergy, but it ought not to be taken for granted.

The final paragraph of this section, 328, contains a similar sleight of hand, moving from the honouring of the call to celibacy, whether heterosexual and homosexual, and its need of support, to the claim that

'Neither Christians who experience same sex attraction and who seek support in living according to the teaching of the Church as they understand it, nor the organizations and individuals who offer that support, should be labelled "homophobic".'

Not in the abstract, obviously, but each case, surely, would have to be taken on its merits, depending upon what the person or organisation did and said.

Science, society and demographics

The message here (paragraphs 329-330) is that the scientific evidence (for the causes of homosexuality?) are inconclusive and so unable to determine the moral arguments (which are?), but the working party 'have been committed as a group to taking the scientific evidence seriously and we commend this approach to the whole church' (paragraph 331), which sounds slightly inconsistent. Scientific method seems to provide a handy justification (paragraph 334) for maintaining the status quo: 'the teaching of the Church, like a thesis in scientific enquiry, stands until the evidence contradicting it is sufficient to change it.' But science, as the Report notes, proceeds by the testing of hypotheses, and what is needed now, in relation to LGB&T people, is precisely a working hypothesis that will effectively demonstrate that the radical, unconditional nature of God's love for them is recognised by the Church.

The Report's reflections on the evidence from recent opinion polls concludes (paragraph 338) that 'the emerging picture is one of the Church, at least in its official teaching, being increasingly out of step with wider society.' This is discussed in terms of God's action in the world and the Church's mission. With regard to the first of these it declares,

'We believe that God's grace is mediated, not solely through the institutional church, but by God's presence before us in the world and his continuing activity in the Holy Spirit which is not confined to working through Christians.'

This was unclear earlier in the Report, though I am unconvinced that it maintains this perspective overall, and once again the current rate of social change is the reason offered for not considering doctrinal change (paragraph 334).

Reflecting missiologically, the Report suggests (paragraph 348) that

'The Church needs to think afresh how its traditional teaching on sexuality can commend itself to a culture which is increasingly relaxed about same sex relationships, or whether the teaching itself does not sufficiently represent the gospel imperative and must be refreshed by new insights.'

It might have been helpful if the working party had started to address those questions, given the rate at which social attitudes are changing. Lack of consensus has been the stated reason for maintaining the church's doctrine, but paragraph 349 suggests another: 'the debate needs more time to develop', and the next paragraph even speculates that a majority in the Church of England might be ready for change, and that it could be put to the dioceses, as the women bishops legislation has been, as well as to General Synod.

The degree to which the present teaching – in the form of *Issues in human sexuality* – has been imposed on clergy is acknowledged when the Report affirms that 'it is important for alternative views to be explored openly as part of an ongoing process of discernment. As leaders in discerning the gospel message for our culture, it is right that those with teaching authority should be able to participate openly and honestly in that debate.'

12. Process and Practice

A process for listening to each other

This section outlines what the working party believes (paragraph 352) is 'the way forward for the Church': 'an intentional process of attentive listening between Christians whose understandings of Scripture and God's calling for the Church and the world differed widely.' This is obviously a worthwhile objective in itself, but I have reservations about whether it can generate the kind of journey (though it's unclear what is meant by that) that the working party anticipates, not least because the Church's official teaching already enshrines a single interpretation that puts most LGB&T people at a huge disadvantage from the start.

Unlike the earlier listening process in the Anglican Communion, which the Report concedes was 'patchy', and which involved 'listening to the views and experiences of gay and lesbian people', the working party

'propose a structured process so that members of the Church who hold radically different understandings of the implications of Scripture and Christian ethics for gay and lesbian Christians might listen to one another, whatever their own sexual orientation. With so much rancour and pain surrounding these differences over so many years, a first objective is to find ways to recognize that apparent antagonists are nevertheless sincere and prayerful Christians striving to live faithfully.'

(Paragraph 354)

I have already participated in a conversation like this – in fact the Report mentions earlier meetings in its account of the listening process (paragraph 21). It was awkward to begin with as there were suspicions and preconceptions on both sides (and in that instance it resembled the meeting of two opposing factions), but these began to break down as we related to one another

as human beings and people of faith. Yet as the Report has already admitted, views have tended to harden despite this kind of process. My own explanation for this is that the teaching as it stands is becoming unsustainable and we are witnessing a final battle to defend or replace it. If I am right, the facilitated conversations proposed here look like avoidance of the inevitable, and as a process without anticipated outcome, a high risky strategy; but risks can sometimes pay off, and perhaps the Holy Spirit will make use of this one and surprise everyone.

The envisaged conversations will be similar to the 'Indaba' process at the 2008 Lambeth Conference and a summary is given outlining its character. This section seems the most important and I've highlighted some of the key features:

*'In Indaba, we must be aware of these challenges (issues) **without immediately trying to resolve them one way or the other.** We meet and converse, **ensuring that everybody has a voice,** and contributes (in our case, praying that it might be under the guidance of the Holy Spirit) and that the issues at hand are fully defined and understood by all. The purpose of the discussion is **to find out the deeper convergences that might hold people together in difference** and come to a deeper understanding of the topic or issue discussed. This will be achieved by **seeking to understand exactly the thinking behind position other than my own.**' (Paragraph 356 – emphasis mine)*

This will be challenging for everyone, not least those responsible for its facilitation. Its purpose, we are assured, is 'relational, not institutional' (paragraph 357), but many of the problems LGB&T people encounter in church settings are institutional, or arise because of the message given by the institution. In most parallel situations it is usual to address the structural issues first so that relationships can flourish – that is how equality legislation has transformed other institutions, but this is not what is recommended by the Report. Transformation is anticipated through conversation, animated by prayer: 'Prayer must be the context in which the process is designed, facilitated and engaged with, by those responsible for implementing the idea and by all who participate in it (paragraph 361).'

The facilitated conversations will take place in the dioceses and the bishops are expected to lead on this. As is well-known now, the timescale is two years (paragraphs 362-65). It is also suggested that some groups might visit other parts of the Communion, 'where for example gay people's rights are not protected and where homophobic violence is more prevalent. Such visits would create opportunities for participants to hear firsthand accounts from those countries and also to explore how decisions made in other parts of the Communion can rebound on Anglicans elsewhere.' This proposal and aim ring particularly hollow at the moment following the

introduction of anti-homosexual legislation in Nigeria, with support from the Nigerian Anglican Church's leadership, but with no protest so far from the Church of England or the rest of the Communion.

The Church's Practice

From paragraph 369 it would seem that most members of the working party were open to a change in the church's teaching, but that some were not yet convinced by 'the evidence received.' As I have noted earlier, it is difficult to know from the Report exactly what evidence has been surveyed and what the missing evidence might look like. The next paragraph, 370, notes 'We recognize that there is widespread experience of homosexual people not being accepted and welcomed into church unconditionally', without considering, of course, that it might be the Church's teaching itself which makes them feel unwelcome.

The Report moves swiftly on to 'the pastoral care of faithful Christians who seek ecclesial recognition for their same sex relationship' and the discernment process for ordained ministry.

Celebrating permanent and faithful partnerships

The first subject for consideration is the discrepancy in the Church's practice – and in its teaching, given that it is stated in *Issues in human sexuality* – in that lay people may, in good conscience, enter into a physically intimate (these are my words and closer to the term 'physical expression' of *Issues* 5.6 rather than the Report's 'sexually active' which follows *Issues* 5.11) relationships, but clergy may not. The authors note complaints that this differential lacks 'sufficient or adequate theological rationale' (paragraph 372) but justify it (paragraph 373) on the ground that 'it is entirely legitimate for the Church to require higher standards of conduct from its clergy than for the laity (and, indeed, higher standards from its bishops than from the clergy).' This seems to reveal the authors' belief that a physically intimate relationship between a couple of the same sex is somehow 'sub standard': it is hard to read it any other way and illustrates the pitfalls of avoiding the theological task. Instead, the issue is to be passed on to the facilitated conversations for 'exploration', without any thought of how problematic it might be for clergy to be under such scrutiny in the new world created by the Clergy Discipline Measure. The Report continues by noting the changed context, following the introduction of civil partnerships and with the prospect of same sex marriage (paragraph 374). Again there is special pleading in the claim that 'when the legislation concerning civil partnerships was debated in the House of Lords, the majority of the bishops who voted on the issue took a positive line'. True, there was a majority in favour at the final vote, but some bishops were very active in promoting the amendments that could easily have wrecked the Bill, and in making speeches that caused

great pain to LGBT people. We are then told (paragraph 375) that in its response to the government consultation on same sex marriage 'the House of Bishops and the Archbishops' Council welcomed civil partnerships for their emphasis on fidelity and commitment and for their role in giving important legal rights to committed same sex couples,' but this welcome came eight years too late, and was not reflected in the pastoral statement issued by the House in 2005. Shockingly, the 'sub standard' argument is resumed, without explanation or justification (paragraph 376): 'Opposition to same sex marriage has largely focused on the detriment to the social understanding of marriage which may follow from conflating heterosexual and same sex relationships within a single legal and social institution.' The Report, however, is pragmatic. With same sex marriage imminent, civil partnerships may now seem a preferable alternative (in the authors' opinion), but their time is limited and the Church must reckon with the reality of married same sex couples. Confident that the facilitated conversations will break new ground, the Report suggests that were the House of Bishops to issue a pastoral statement on same sex marriage it should have a provisional status (paragraph 377-78).

Here we reach the nub of this section: 'what clergy should do when approached by parishioners or members of their congregations who are about to enter into a civil partnership or same sex marriage and would like some public recognition of, and prayer for, their new situation' (paragraph 379). Again, the Report's recommendation has been well-publicised. The arguments for and against the introduction of an official liturgy are reviewed (paragraphs 380-81), including the anxiety this might create for those who have faithfully abided by the Church's teaching, but the crucial point is that such a rite would be in keeping with an often overlooked part of that teaching:

'And, in any event, the House of Bishops acknowledged, as long ago as 1991 in Issues in Human Sexuality, that gay and lesbian lay Christians might in good conscience decide to enter into sexually faithful monogamous relationships.'

In addition, it is also justified as a response to the evidence the working party received of the Church's poor record of hospitality, (for which read blatant discrimination):

Moreover, some form of celebration of civil partnerships in a church context is widely seen as a practice that would give a clear signal that gay and lesbian people are welcome in church.'

An authorised rite is ruled out (paragraph 384), however, because the moral and doctrinal issues have not been settled – might that not be a reason to get on and do that? But given that 'the pastoral and missiological pressure to find ways of communicating good news to people in same sex relationships is becoming acute' (paragraph 386), 'some of us believe there is scope to

consider less formal approaches to recognizing and praying for same sex couples after they have registered a civil partnership or entered into a same sex marriage.’

It’s all rather tentative, but this ‘pastoral accommodation’ (paragraph 388) is supported by the reference to the need for a pastoral and sensitive response in the House of Bishops’ 2005 Pastoral Statement on Civil Partnerships (paragraph 387), and by analogy with the Church of Scotland’s decision of May 2013, (in relation to clergy in same sex partnerships), to uphold the traditional teaching but allow those with conscientious objections to it to appoint ministers in civil partnerships (paragraph 389).

This welcome development is a matter of conscience: clergy will not be forced to do this, and must consult with their PCC if they wish to do so (paragraph 392).

The subsection ends with a reminder that the General Synod has not yet discussed the principle of registering Church of England premises for Civil Partnerships (paragraph 395) – surely a little late in the day now – and would be the body that would amend existing legislation which prevents Church of England clergy from solemnizing same sex marriages in its buildings were the Church to change its mind on this subject.

Questions to candidates to ministry

The report takes four pages to say, what ought to be obvious, ‘that all candidates for ministry should be treated in the same way regarding their sexual conduct’ (paragraph 411) and ‘that care should be taken to ensure that questions do not require a homosexual candidate to go into more intimate detail about their life than would be required of a heterosexual candidate’ (paragraph 413). That intrusive questions have been asked of gay and lesbian candidates (acknowledged at paragraph 400), and additional hurdles put in their way, is a scandal, and entirely attributable to the emphasis on *Issues* in the section of the DDO’s handbook that deals with ‘Sexual orientation, civil partnerships’ alongside ‘marriage breakdown and divorce’ (quoted at paragraph 406) – an unfortunate pairing that creates the impression of a problem where one need not exist.

It is in these kinds of settings that the Church’s institutional homophobia, if it exists, is likely to manifest itself, and perhaps this is why the call for the Church to repent – long overdue in terms of the Report’s structure – is in the set of recommendations that appear at this point:

‘The whole Church is called to real repentance for the lack of welcome and acceptance extended to homosexual people in the past, and to demonstrate the unconditional acceptance and love of God in Christ for all people.’ (Recommendation 14)

13. The Dissenter

A Dissenting Statement by the Bishop of Birkenhead

The Pilling Report was intended to address the situation of a sexual minority within the Church of England and society. The voices of this minority were listened to by the working party but are only heard at one remove, and sometimes in highly edited form, within the Report. It would have been appropriate to devote space to these voices. Instead a vast number of pages are given to the one member of the working party who was unable to sign up to its fairly modest recommendations. It is not even a minority report – for a minority implies more than one person – it is an individual dissenting statement. Reading between the lines of the Report it seems that this dissident voice, though respectfully listened to, was problematic for the group due to its uncompromising character, though this dissenting statement begins with gracious words. There is something very skewed, indeed, however, that this particular voice should be privileged here and as author of one of the two appendix articles on Scripture.

That said, the statement contains some important information or reflections that are not in the main Report. For example, at paragraph 419, the remarks about female sexuality and the shift from ‘homosexuality’ to LGBT, Q, P, & A (interestingly Intersex is not mentioned) people. Here too we learn (paragraph 460) – what is hardly surprising when one considers the text of the Report, but a very serious omission – that the working party did not ‘engage with the discipline of “queer theology”’.

The Bishop’s first major point is about the cost of discipleship: ‘Radical inclusion is followed by the call to radical holiness (paragraph 423).’ At paragraph 427 the Bishop personalises the argument with the story of Greg and Margaret and their two children. As an adolescent Greg had been attracted to another young man, but then found ‘women were included in his attraction’. Greg interpreted the transition of his desires for his male friend first to women as well, and then finally to Margaret, with whom he had children, by reference to John 12.24, the grain of wheat that falls into the ground and dies. According to the Bishop ‘The question is ‘Can Jesus rightly ask us to let our sexual attractions and interests be part of the wheat that dies?’ The answer has to be ‘yes’, but the story offers the approved narrative: the death of homosexuality and the birth of heterosexuality, though that Christians are called to this radical obedience whatever their sexual orientation, or its final trajectory, will be acknowledged later at paragraph 430.

The Bishop is troubled by the Report’s lack of clarity.

‘A question that has haunted me is whether Greg would have been helped by the Report to know what following Jesus meant, and my conclusion is that he would not. He would not have been encouraged to ‘die’ and consequently there would have been no new life, no marriage to Margaret

and no birth of their children. If we do not sound a clear call there will be negative personal and pastoral consequences in people's lives.' (Paragraph 432)

Greg could well have had a very different life if he had forged a relationship – let's assume it was lifelong – with his unnamed first love, but he would still have been able to follow Jesus, otherwise we are implying that following Jesus is only for heterosexual people, which is, in effect, what the Bishop seems to believe.

At item (I) paragraph 431 he summarises the Church's official teaching: 'that everyone should remain single and abstinent unless and until they find themselves able to marry someone of the opposite sex.' But that is not the official teaching of the Church of England. *Issues in human sexuality* states that lay people may conscientiously enter into a sexually intimate same sex relationship, which means that the Bishop's concern for same sex attracted people who have abided by the Church's teaching (paragraph 435) is misplaced. The Report introduces nothing new. According to *Issues* (instead the Bishop references the 1987 General Synod motion at paragraph 444) they were already free to enter into a same sex relationship if they felt conscientiously that was God's call for them; if they are clergy it would have to be a celibate relationship.

As I have noted several times, the Report fails to address the issue of gender. This too is a concern for the Bishop, though his reasons differ from mine.

'Rather than upholding the Church's teaching by rooting sexuality in God's loving creation of human beings as male and female and in the God-given institution of marriage, the Report ... undermines that teaching by commending a sexual ethic based solely and simply on the values of permanence and fidelity.' (Paragraph 448)

But permanence and fidelity are also biblical, rooted in the abiding faithfulness of God, and far more universal, and therefore in keeping with the gospel, than the gendered paradigm of marriage, which, can be highly ambiguous in Scripture, e.g. the bride of Christ is both male and female as queer theology is wont to point out. It is a serious weakness of the Report that it did not explore the interface between gender and sexuality.

Like me, though again for different reasons, the Bishop is unhappy that the Report finds the arguments from Scripture, theology, science or social trends to be inconclusive either for or against the Church's current teaching. I have heard that one of the Report's authors did admit, privately, that the Report was being designed to be equally unsatisfactory to, for example, Changing Attitude and Anglican Mainstream, and that does seem to be the case. The facilitated conversations ought to cover the breadth of sexuality and gender, but if that

is not possible, then, like the Bishop, I would prefer them to focus on listening to LGB – and I would add T&I – people, rather than the interpretation of Scripture (paragraph 451). As the Bishop notes, ‘The argument that the current debate in the Church about sexuality needs to be seen as inconclusive is central to the Report (paragraph 452).’ Indeed it is, and it is a great weakness: the Report has chosen to sit on the fence and this could well be its undoing.

Quoting *Issues in human sexuality* (at paragraph 454) the Bishop believes that clear conclusions are possible about sexual ethics, but that Report was published back in 1991, without the kind of research undertaken by the working party, and even the Bishop’s own statement acknowledges that much has changed since then. Though he exaggerates its uncertainty (with the phrase ‘no good reason’) the Bishop highlights a glaring inconsistency in the Report’s argument:

‘Will that not mean, if the Report is adopted, that the Church of England will continue formally to abide by its existing teaching while at the same time having declared that it has no good reason to think that this teaching is true? This is a position I cannot support. It is also a position I doubt will win the respect of those who conscientiously reject the traditional teaching and offer an alternative vision.’

It’s certainly a frustrating one for the reasons I have explored above.

The Bishop then critiques (paragraphs 457-60) the evidence reviewed in the Report in order to question the claim that it is inconclusive. His concerns are mainly, like mine, about the lack of theological reflection, but it is in relation to the teaching of Scripture that he finds the Report most inadequate and here, and again more fully in the appendix, he counters the arguments from translation, culture differences and ‘the creation of human beings’, even quoting Diarmaid MacCulloch in support of Biblical disapproval of homosexuality (paragraph 467). Yet all these are highly contested areas – which is not to say consensus is lacking – as the two appendix essays demonstrate, and as the working party was well aware.

The Bishop’s analogy (paragraphs 470-71) with the Church’s approach to twentieth century attempts to revise fundamental doctrines about God and Christ does not hold in relation to sexual ethics, which is properly the subject of conversation, reflection, and discovery within the remit of pastoral and practical theology.

The Bishop believes that the Church ‘cannot commend and affirm non-marital sexual relationships in its teaching or practice’ (paragraph 472), but the Church of England has already done so in *Issues*, but instead he refers to Lambeth 1.10 at this point. He then lists six reasons why he thinks the proposed pastoral accommodation is wrong.

First, that the Church of England ‘cannot with integrity offer or formally allow a service for any pattern of sexual relationship other than marriage’ (paragraph 476). If only there were room for ‘accommodation’ about this now that we are on the brink of equal marriage, but this is impossible for the Bishop, who believes that same sex relations – even if the couple were married – are forbidden by Scripture (474).

Secondly, at paragraph 477, he notes that the Report is ambiguous about whether the proposed service would be open to the sexually intimate as well as celibate couples, but this would not, as the Bishop believes, undermine the Church’s teaching because sexual intimacy is already permitted for lay couples by *Issues*.

Thirdly, at paragraph 478, he claims that the public celebration of the fact that two people had entered into a same sex partnership would conflict with the Church of England’s doctrine that marriage can only take place between a man and a woman, but this insistence on the gender of the couple is one of the matters at issue, and has only gained prominence in the very recent document *Men and women in marriage* and the Church of England’s submission to the government consultation on same sex marriage.

Fourthly, at paragraph 479, he argues that the freedom conferred on parish priests, in consultation with their PCC, to offer public celebrations will undermine the bishop’s authority and create liturgical anarchy, but there is a parallel here with the discretion exercised by clergy during the long years when the Church of England was deciding whether or not to permit the marriage of those who had been divorced, and the service of Prayer and Dedication after Civil Marriage will no doubt provide a template for many of these services.

Fifthly, at paragraph 480, the Bishop describes these public celebrations as an example of the cultural captivity of the Church which will undermine its proclamation of a biblical sexual ethic, but it is the very nature of that ethic that is in dispute or under discussion.

Sixthly, at paragraph 481, the Bishop emphasises that these services, even if not called blessings, will be exactly that, and that he is unable to countenance the blessing of a same sex couple on biblical grounds and for theological reasons, but his quotation from Canadian theologian, Edith Humphrey, is extremely shocking and should never have been included in a Report of this kind. The Bishop also has concerns about the negative impact of the facilitated conversations on the Anglican Communion (paragraph 483), and its relationships with other churches (paragraph 485).

The ‘better way’ proposed by the Bishop is summed up in ten propositions (paragraph 488) published by the Evangelical Alliance, but the Evangelical Alliance’s documents on

homosexuality and transsexuality, while often quoted, are not noted for their attention to scientific evidence or for their engagement with LGB&T people.

The Bishop's final paragraph (489) is a call 'not to be conformed to the prevailing culture', but begs the question why 'our society increasingly ... sees any opposition to homosexual practise (sic) as morally reprehensible'.

14. And lastly ...

The 'final' part of the Report – there are important Appendices which I will not be discussing here, or not at the moment – is called

Part 4 Findings and recommendations

This is another example of the Report's eccentricities as most academic papers, especially in science or the social sciences, present the findings first and then reflect on them, but the bulk of this section is made up of the Recommendations and these I have already discussed in detail at the points where they were first outlined.