

A Letter by 9 Diocesan Bishops Concerning the Appointment of the Bishop of Reading.

From the Bishops of Bradford, Carlisle, Chester, Chichester, Exeter, Liverpool, Rochester, Southwell and Winchester.

Date : 16 June 2003

Dear Sir,

The Church's understanding of scripture and of long-standing tradition is that the proper place for sexual relationships is within marriage. This is based on the order of Creation where men and women are seen as complementary. Sexual intercourse, within the life-long relationship of marriage, is the sign and beautiful expression of that union. Intercourse outside marriage undermines the power of that sign.

Any departure from such fundamental teaching must be viewed with grave concern, especially in the case of those who are ordained and called to be examples to God's people.

It is because of such an understanding of human sexuality, that several bishops of the Church of England, as well as many clergy and lay people, have been troubled by the appointment of Dr Jeffrey John as Bishop of Reading in the Diocese of Oxford.

Dr John has many admirable qualities for the work of a bishop. But the issue is 'what is acceptable sexual behaviour in God's sight? By his own admission he has been in a same-sex relationship for twenty years. We value, of course, the gift of same-sex friendship and if this relationship is one of companionship and sexual abstinence, then, we rejoice. We warmly commend such relationships to the Church as a whole.

We are glad at the reassurances from the Bishop of Oxford that Jeffrey John's life is now celibate. But it is the history of the relationship, as well as Dr John's severe criticism of orthodox teaching, which gives concern.

More widely, the appointment appears to prejudice the outcome of the Church's reflection on these matters. We have been repeatedly assured that the House of Bishops' position stated in Issues in Human Sexuality has not changed. A major study guide to this document is to be published towards the end of this year. It does not, we are assured, seek to change the Church's mind on the matter. Yet, in view of his previous teaching, Dr John's statement that he now stands by Issues has to be received somewhat cautiously.

We must, therefore, express our concern because of the Church's constant teaching, in the light of Scripture and because of the basic ordering of men and women in creation.

We must also express our concern because of our responsibility for the Church's unity, both in this country and throughout the world.

Yours sincerely,

+David Bradford, +Graham Carlisle, +Peter Cestr, +John Cicestr, +Michael Exon, +James Liverpool, +Michael Roffen, +George Southwell, +Michael Winton.

Accompanying notes

The purpose of the statement is to give encouragement to clergy and laity of orthodox persuasion that many bishops share their serious concern, and to do so without making any threats or demands.

The statement is supported by the following Suffragan Bishops:

Bedford, Bolton, Lewes, Maidstone, Penrith, Tewkesbury, Willesden