

Churchman

EDITORIAL

Facilitating a conversation

Is it better to laugh or to cry when reading news reports about the goings-on in the Church of England? This question has been asked for a long time, in many different circumstances, but it has acquired a particular poignancy of late. Only a few months ago the House of Bishops announced that it would be inappropriate for ordained clergy to enter a same-sex marriage and the indications were that this policy would be enforced. Those who agreed with it generally said little, though a few were sceptical about how effective it would be. Those who disagreed were furious, and vowed to ignore the guidelines as soon as they could. They would force the issue by creating facts on the ground, and then daring the bishops to do something about it.

So far, it must be said, there has not been a rush of clergy who are already in civil partnerships eager to upgrade their status to that of ‘marriage’, so perhaps the bishops’ warnings are having some effect. On the other hand, at least one clergyman has defied them, creating a test case which many are now watching closely. Canon Jeremy Pemberton, the clergyman in question, has an interesting track record. Of Evangelical provenance, he trained for the ministry at Ridley Hall, Cambridge, married and sired no fewer than five children, which makes it difficult to argue that he was a closet homosexual chafing under the discipline of an intolerant church. After many years in parish ministry, he resigned under somewhat cloudy circumstances and disappeared for a year or two. When he resurfaced it was as a hospital chaplain in Lincoln. By then he had a same-sex partner, and it is to him that he recently got ‘married’. At an earlier stage in his career he and his family spent time in Africa, where he was made an honorary canon of Boga cathedral, in what is now Congo (and was then Zaire). It is not clear whether that canonry has lapsed, or even whether anyone in Boga knows what has happened to him, but it is a fair guess that the authorities there will object to his current civil status and divest him of his honour. More seriously, it will bring home to the African churches, in a way that more distant news items do not, just how easily they can get caught up in the affairs of the Church of England without realising it. That in turn is likely to galvanise them into making even stronger protests at the way in which such behaviour can

be tolerated in the mother church, with consequences for the Anglican Communion that can easily be imagined.

What has been particularly revealing in this episode is the reaction of the church authorities at home. The bishop of Lincoln, who admits to having been informed of Canon Pemberton's intention to 'marry' in advance, apparently called him in and read the bishops' guidelines to him. He does not have a licence in the diocese, so that could not be revoked, and as he is employed by the state there is nothing that the bishop could do to terminate his employment. It seems that Canon Pemberton has permission to officiate, but in the diocese of Southwell and Nottingham, where he lives, and which is without a bishop at the moment. It also has the disadvantage of being in another ecclesiastical province – York, not Canterbury – which makes it unclear which metropolitan should take responsibility for him. These, however, are legal niceties. What really catches the eye is that both the bishop of Lincoln and the archbishop of Canterbury, in correspondence replying to those who have written to them about it, have emphasised that the matter is subject to review by a process of 'facilitated conversations', as recommended in the Pilling Report that was published seven months ago. In other words, we should not expect the bishops to enforce their guidelines until these conversations have taken place, which could mean a delay of two or three years. By then, of course, the situation is liable to have evolved in the direction of permanence and the pressure to accept the new circumstances may be overwhelming.

To their credit, many Evangelical observers have all along seen the 'facilitated conversations' as the sham that they are. Those with experience of such things know that they are a device for wearing down tiresome conservative opposition to change. The radicals have no intention of backing down and their impatience with the whole process is often palpable, but they may be forced to put up with it as the price of peace within the church. In any case, it works to their advantage in the longer term. They will do whatever they want in the meantime, so it does not matter to them how long the conversations drag on – in a sense, the longer, the better. If they can keep the illusion of indecision going for a reasonable amount of time, they can encourage more people to enter same-sex 'marriages' and make it more difficult for opponents to do anything about them. So why not? Conservatives know this, of course, which is why so few of them want to enter these conversations in the first place. What is the point of having an indefinite stand-off when there is no prospect of any genuine reconciliation and when the likely outcome will be a defeat for them? In truth, this is a battle that one side must win but that neither can afford to lose. If the liberals are defeated, those in same-sex 'marriages' will be forced out of the church. But if the conservatives fail to make their case, the Church of England will split wide open and

the Anglican Communion may cease to exist. Which of the two outcomes will it be?

The archbishop of Canterbury has spoken more generally of his desire to promote 'good disagreement' but quite what that amounts to in this case is unclear. Within the Church of England, 'good disagreement' tends to mean that people who are at loggerheads have as little to do with one another as possible. This works fairly well at parish level, but can cause problems when people of different churchmanships are expected to work together. In practice they seldom do, with the result that the higher echelons of the church hierarchy tend to be Evangelical-free zones, though admittedly there are some dioceses where that is less true than it is elsewhere. With the advent of ordained women, conservative Anglo-Catholics are being increasingly shut out as well. On the question of same-sex relationships, 'good disagreement' cannot include the tolerance of gay marriage, for the simple reason that those opposed to it believe that it is a sin. They may hesitate to say that openly, but everybody knows that that is what they think. 'Good disagreement' is simply not possible when the issue is one of right or wrong, so a facilitated conversation that does nothing but make that clear will not produce it. The retiring bishop of Oxford has been honest enough to admit this, but in line with his fellow bishops, he still clings to the notion that such conversations ought to take place. He knows that they will give the liberals time to establish same-sex 'marriages' among the clergy and leave those opposed completely frustrated in their attempts to block them, and that is presumably what he wants.

The likelihood of this outcome has been strengthened by the admission of the dean of York that she is in favour of same-sex marriages, thinks that the bishops have got it wrong, and is doing her best to get round their restrictions without actually breaking them. This might not matter too much in other circumstances, but as she is widely touted to become one of the first women bishops, if not the first, when the legislation allowing them is finally passed later this year or early in 2015, it is a matter of serious concern. Her statements have left the archbishops, both of whom favour the consecration of women bishops but are opposed to same-sex 'marriage', in an invidious position. A man who made the kind of remarks the dean has come out with could kiss good-bye to preferment, and rightly so. But we are dealing here with a woman, which in a church that has now made 'gender equality' a fundamental article of its faith, makes a world of difference. If the dean is refused a mitre, will this not be seen as covert discrimination, a rearguard action by an establishment that is determined to obstruct progress as much as it can? After all, the dean has not actually broken any rules – she has only objected to them publicly and told the world that she has done what she can to ignore them! Why should that be held against her?

In any sane, well-run organisation someone who said that would be given the boot, regardless of her gender or sexual orientation. It would be obvious that a person who openly dissents from official policy and does what she can to undermine it has no credibility as a church leader and should not be accepted as such. But of course, we are dealing here with the Church of England, where there has been a long tradition of ignoring the rules, only to see them subsequently abandoned. Can this not happen again? If the dean of York becomes a bishop, surely she will only be in the vanguard of progress – she as a woman bishop today, someone else as a lesbian in a same-sex ‘marriage’ tomorrow. Why not? It has already happened in the Church of Sweden, a country that many regard as having one step in the future, and in the American Episcopal Church. In fact, the Americans have now gone one step further. Gene Robinson, sometime bishop of New Hampshire, who ‘married’ his same-sex lover a few years ago, has just announced that they are getting divorced. That in itself is hardly a surprise, but his public statements have emphasised that they are still a loving couple who are merely entering a new phase in their relationship for which they ask our prayers! Same-sex ‘marriage’ is not the end of the road but merely a stage on a journey already travelled by a great many heterosexual clergy and laypeople. Bishop Robinson and his partner are therefore really no different from anyone else – the matrimonial cycle that is increasingly being tolerated in the church has now reached out to embrace them as well, proving to everyone just how ‘normal’ they are.

From one point of view, all this must seem hilarious. Just when same-sex ‘marriage’ creeps into the clergy of the Church of England, its leading exponent and forerunner in the USA announces that he is abandoning it and moving on to the next stage. Just as women seem poised to break through the glass ceiling to the dizzy heights of episcopal office, the bishops issue a directive that the leading candidate for this honour repudiates. She may forfeit her chances as a result, but since the bishops are most unlikely to enforce their own rules, her disappointment may end up looking like misogyny on the part of men who have done all they can to prove that they are free of it. Meanwhile, the one person who has openly broken the rules and (so far) got away with it is a canon – of a cathedral in an African country where his behaviour is illegal and may even be punishable by death, if not *de jure* then probably *de facto*. Even Lewis Carroll could not have made this up.

Where do we go from here? The mind boggles. Will we end up with conservative male clergy preferring women bishops because as practising heterosexuals, they have less to fear from their hands than from those of their male counterparts? It sounds absurd, but then everything in the previous paragraph would have sounded that way a generation ago, and look where we are now. Satire is a cruel but effective weapon and maybe

that is the best way forward for those who are appalled by what has been going on. On the other hand, more tender consciences may think that weeping is to be preferred to laughter. The church is supposed to be a society honouring God and his revelation, but instead of that we see Satan grasping at episcopal thrones and doing his best to sow confusion in the ranks. Does this not break the heart of every true believer? How can we be seen in the company of those who so flagrantly despise the truth and who expect us to go along with them, at least silently? If we say nothing, will not the very stones cry out?

This perhaps is the conversation that we ought to be facilitating. What is the better response to the evil that threatens to engulf us? Should we meet it on its own terms and show it up for what it is, or should we attack it head-on, giving no quarter because none is possible? Each option is fraught with danger and neither is altogether satisfactory. Yet perhaps by facilitating this kind of conversation we may come to a third way that can be embraced with a clear conscience and lead to the result that those who put God first must surely desire. We cannot sit back and let the church fall into the hands of those who would pervert the law of God in the name of love, but at the same time we must do our utmost to ensure that our approach is one of true love for our fellow men and women. We are not better than they are and in many ways we may well be worse. But we are different from them because we believe that although we may be the chief of sinners, we have been saved by the grace of God and transformed into a new creation in Christ. That is what we want to see happen to those who have fallen into the abyss of same-sex 'marriage'. Not 'good disagreement' between right and wrong, but changed lives showing the world that the light shines in the darkness, and that despite the best efforts of the state, the press and those in the church who have been promoted to the level of their infidelity, the darkness has not put it out.

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