

Responding to the Pilling Report

**What should we do to honour
the Lord?**

A Briefing from Reform for PCCs

January 2014

The Pilling Report

What is the Pilling Report?

The Pilling Report was published in November 2013. It has emerged from a working party set up by the House of Bishops in 2011, whose remit was to review what had happened as a result of the listening process on ‘the experience of homosexual persons’ recommended by the 1998 Lambeth Conference¹ and then report to the House of Bishops.

The Report has recommended, amongst other things, that the Church of England enter into a period of facilitated conversations about the rightness of homosexual partnerships and suggests consideration should be given to allowing clergy to conduct public services marking the formation of a permanent same-sex union. These proposals would set the Church on a very divisive trajectory.

Bishop Keith Sinclair, one of the four bishops on the Working Party, disagreed with the findings of the report and wrote a very helpful dissenting statement.

Putting the Pilling Report in context

Despite the Pilling Report’s terms of reference, little attention is paid to the main conclusions of the key findings of the 1998 Lambeth Conference, which are found in Para 1.10 of the Lambeth Statement (see Appendix 1) or to the way in which the listening process has taken place in the church since 1998. For example, no mention is made of the lukewarm reception General Synod gave to the 2005 House of Bishops Pastoral Statement on Civil Partnerships, nor its recommitment to the Lambeth Statement in 2007.

The Report claims that it upholds the Church of England’s current teaching on marriage, which in summary states that all sexual relationships outside marriage, whether heterosexual or between people of the same sex, are regarded as falling short of God’s purposes for human beings (see Appendix 2 for detail). The Report suggests that it is possible to change the practice of the Church on the ground through a series of ‘pastoral accommodations’ without affecting the doctrine or teaching. There are great dangers that this will either

¹ A meeting called by the Archbishop of Canterbury to bring together Global Anglican Primates – ie all the Archbishops of all the Anglican Provinces around the world.

leave us open to the charge of being hypocritical or lead to a change of the teaching in future to fit with the new practice.

The Pilling Report and Scripture

The Pilling Report states clearly that Scripture is the primary source of authority for Christians (para 301); that it is illumined by reason and we are assisted in our understanding by tradition. Which is encouraging.

However, having recognized the place of Scripture, the Report effectively qualifies its primacy; Scripture becomes merely *“a touchstone for things necessary for salvation”* (para 286) and we are encouraged to take a *‘conciliar Anglican approach’* to ethics (para 316), which just means that tradition and reason are not subordinate to Scripture (para 317). It seems that rather than seeing ‘primacy’ as meaning ‘of first importance’ the Report treats Scripture as being the ‘first place to look before moving on to reason and tradition’. The process undertaken by the Working Group itself reflects this. Instead of weighing up the relative merits of different interpretations of Scripture, they merely commend the equal commitment of the different theologians (para 235) and then decide to engage with the theologians who have *“interesting new things to say”* (para 256).

In summary the Report claims it *“cannot attempt a definitive account of the debate about the meaning of Scripture, even if such an enterprise were conceivable”* (para 223). So despite Scripture being our supreme authority, the implication is that issues of interpretation are too complicated to enable Scripture to speak to us clearly on this subject.

In fact the Report leaves a reader with the impression that there is a finely balanced debate about what the Bible says about homosexuality – and that therefore nobody should draw firm conclusions: *‘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 ... We learn from what previous generations of the faithful have understood the Holy Spirit to be saying to the Churches, wait for the Spirit’s guidance in our own generation, and commit ourselves to finding ways for the Church to continue to listen for his voice’* (para 312). The latter statement clearly implies a search outside Scripture.

The Pilling Report's Conclusions

Inevitably in a 200-page report, there is information that is both useful and challenging. There are a total of 18 conclusions. Some of these are unexceptional, some are helpful, some are challenging and some beg a lot of questions. See Appendix 3 for further detail.

However, the two main conclusions of the report follow on from its representation of Scripture as an uncertain guide. These are:

- **Facilitated Discussions**

The second recommendation states, *'The subject of sexuality, with its history of deeply entrenched views, would best be addressed by facilitated conversations or a similar process ... at national and diocesan level. This should continue to involve profound reflection on the interpretation and application of Scripture.'*

This is not a neutral proposal. As Bishop Keith Sinclair puts it: *"the proposal for facilitated discussions rests on a false premise, namely that we cannot be sure what the Church should believe, teach and practise in the area of human sexuality"* (para 483). This means that the basis for the discussions will be the conclusions drawn by the Pilling Report, rather than those drawn by Scripture. Its reference to 'profound reflection' on Scripture has to be seen in the light of the Report's own conclusions about the uncertainty of the Biblical witness.

- **Church Services for Same Sex Couples**

The sixteenth recommendation states, *'We believe there can be circumstances where a priest, with the agreement of the relevant PCC, should be free to mark the formation of a permanent same sex relationship in a public service but should be under no obligation to do so. Some of us do not believe that this can be extended to same sex marriage.'*

The seventeenth recommendation goes on to say, *"While the Church abides by its traditional teaching such public services would be of the nature of a pastoral accommodation and so the Church of England should not authorize a formal liturgy for use for this purpose."*

However, if implemented, these recommendations would mark a major turning point for the Church of England for at least two reasons:

First, as Bishop Keith Sinclair remarks, *“even if what is proposed are not called blessings, that is what they will in fact be. They will be occasions when God’s blessing is invoked upon a same sex relationship”* (para 481). Once this has been done, what possible argument could be advanced against churches being allowed (and later required) to conduct same sex marriages?

Secondly, it would therefore go against the Lambeth Conference 1998 1.10, which said we *“cannot advise the legitimising or blessing of same sex unions”*. This will have serious implications both within the Church of England and in the wider Anglican Communion.

The Dissenting Statement by the Bishop of Birkenhead

Bishop Keith Sinclair says *‘I am not persuaded that the biblical witness on same sexual behaviour is unclear’* (para 416). He starts by stressing Christ’s teaching on love, obedience and self denial – and shows how this has worked out in the case of one of many Christian men who experienced same sex attraction, but chose not to act upon it. He stresses that all of us, in all our relationships, are, in different ways fallen, but that our sin has been dealt with by the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus. As a consequence, Bishop Keith declares: *‘I believe it is time to speak again with conviction; not singling out same sex or bisexual attraction and behaviour especially, but to set out the whole attractive biblical vision for the ordering of human relationships that I believe holds such good news for human flourishing’*(para 446).

Bishop Keith challenges the grounds on which the Report says that the teaching of Scripture is inconclusive (para 464-6 and Appendix 3 of the Report) by showing that:

- the example chosen in the report to demonstrate difficulties in translation in fact shows the complete reverse.
- the report fails to support its argument that we cannot know to what Paul was referring when he talks about homosexuality
- the Report inadequately describes the content of Genesis 2 when it describes man and woman brought together in ‘companionship.’

Bishop Keith comments, *“the Church cannot hold a public service for a couple simply on the basis that it discerns virtues and good qualities in their*

relationship. It must also be confident that the pattern of relationship it is affirming is in accordance with God's will". He finishes by specifically disagreeing with a number of central recommendations and by putting forward a better vision for the Church as expressed by the Evangelical Alliance (see Appendix).

Responding to Pilling: What should we do to honour the Lord?

What should we do to honour the Lord? The Apostle Paul's answer in Philippians 1:27 is to 'conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then ... I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel ...' (NIV). It's clear that such contending has to take place within the church as much as outside. In writing to Timothy, Paul urges him to 'Preach the Word ... correct, rebuke and encourage with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine ...' (NIV). In short, we must stand for Biblical truth, acting with integrity and being both clear and gracious in our approach. What follows therefore are suggested ways in which PCCs can adopt both principled and careful responses to the current challenge presented by the Pilling Report. It is important to affirm some of the recommendations of the Pilling report (see Appendix 2). There is much we can learn from science (7) and we need to recognise cultural attitudes have changed (8). As evangelicals we need to take seriously the call to repent for any homophobic attitudes that we have held or failed to rebuke (5). We also need to take seriously the need to listen to those who experience same-sex attraction (9a), however we must make clear that we do not do this so that we can discover the moral will of God but in order that we can understand how best to walk alongside them in the complexities of life.

Any actions we take will be in danger of being misinterpreted as homophobic and proof that we are obsessed with what others get up to in their bedrooms. We need, therefore, to be clear that we do not consider that homosexual activity is somehow uniquely sinful. We need to state that the reason we take this issue so seriously is because God takes all sin seriously and it is the desire

of others to call good that which God has called sin that has led to our actions. In many ways we would have the same difficulties if the Church suggested public services to mark and affirm other sins such as theft, greed, drunkenness or slander (I Cor 6:9-10) or for that matter the start of a co-habiting heterosexual relationship. It is not the nature of the sin that makes this a primary issue but the denial of that which God has made clear.

We also acknowledge that amongst those who seek to remain faithful to God's word in this area there may be different views of how we should respond to this, and other, false teaching. We hope that despite potential disagreements about the detail of any actions taken by different individuals and churches, we can be gracious to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ and seek to work together as much as is possible.

What can we do?

We all need to ensure that our churches are welcoming and supportive places for all, including those who experience same-sex attraction and their families, whilst encouraging everyone to a saving and life changing knowledge of Jesus Christ. The web site www.livingout.org provides great resources for such support, as does the www.truefreedomtrust.co.uk. You may find it helpful to read Sam Allberry's little book, "Is God Anti-Gay?" or Alex Tylee's book "Walking with Gay Friends".

There will also be the need to consider how best we can uphold and defend biblical truth on matters of sexuality in our local and national church. There are a number of matters that it would be helpful for PCCs to discuss.

- 1) Some PCCs have adopted a resolution to re-enforce the Bible's teaching on marriage; disavow and repent of any homophobic behaviour; support all church members in their battle against all sexual temptation; and in particular support church members who experience same sex attraction. Would that be something your PCC might do?
- 2) A PCC may determine to publically endorse and pray for those who are standing up and standing out on this matter. The Bishop of Birkenhead, for example, has made a courageous and principled stand by issuing a Dissenting Statement and others are speaking regularly in private and public settings. Would that be something your PCC might do?
- 3) PCCs may wish to consider how best they can support Bishops who wish

to hold to orthodox teaching. At the very least they will need our prayers before during and after the House of Bishops meeting in January. Would that be something your PCC might do?

- 4) Each PCC will need to decide how they will respond to requests for facilitated talks, as suggested by the Report. In his dissenting statement the Bishop of Birkenhead points out that any such discussion will be based on the false premise that the Bible's teaching is unclear about same-sex sexual behavior, which makes it very difficult to see how one can enter into the process without accepting this false premise. PCCs may wish, therefore, to avoid facilitated discussions of this type or those designed to find a compromise. On the other hand a different approach may be appropriate where discussions just offer opportunities for people to share their views and ask questions with a clear understanding that no attempt is being made to find middle-ground or change the Church's teaching as outlined in Appendix 2.
- 5) Public statements and actions of particular Diocesan Bishops or other Senior Staff may place PCCs in a difficult position. It may be helpful for PCCs to consider the implications of such actions on their relationship with the rest of the Diocese prior to the event. Consideration may need to be given to whether it is appropriate to subsidise the work of those pursuing the unfaithful and disastrous trajectory outlined in the Pilling Report.
- 6) Finally, we would encourage all evangelical Anglicans to be informed about these matters, so that we can all contend faithfully for the truth. Many of our best scholars are working hard to produce readable and freely available resources to help our understanding. It is incredible that despite the fact that the historical and literary evidence points to an orthodox understanding of Scripture many continue to believe otherwise.. Reform will be keeping members informed of these resources through regular email updates.

Appendix 1: The Lambeth Conference, Resolution 1.10

This Conference:

- a. commends to the Church the subsection report on human sexuality [1];
- b. in view of the teaching of Scripture, upholds faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union, and believes that abstinence is right for those who are not called to marriage;
- c. recognises that there are among us persons who experience themselves as having a homosexual orientation. Many of these are members of the Church and are seeking the pastoral care, moral direction of the Church, and God's transforming power for the living of their lives and the ordering of relationships. We commit ourselves to listen to the experience of homosexual persons and we wish to assure 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;
- d. while rejecting homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture, calls on all our people to minister pastorally and sensitively to all irrespective of sexual orientation and to condemn irrational fear of homosexuals, violence within marriage and any trivialisation and commercialisation of sex;
- e. cannot advise the legitimising or blessing of same sex unions nor ordaining those involved in same gender unions;
- f. requests the Primates and the ACC to establish a means of monitoring the work done on the subject of human sexuality in the Communion and to share statements and resources among us;
- g. notes the significance of the Kuala Lumpur Statement on Human Sexuality and the concerns expressed in resolutions IV.26, V.1, V.10, V.23 and V.35 on the authority of Scripture in matters of marriage and sexuality and asks the Primates and the ACC to include them in their monitoring process.

Appendix 2: The Current “Teaching” of the Church of England

- The Hlilton motion (General Synod 1987), agreed that fornication, adultery and homosexual genital acts fall short of the ideal and should be met with a call to repentance and the exercise of compassion.
- Issues of Human Sexuality - a Statement from the House of Bishops which made clear that Scripture, tradition and reasoned reflection made it impossible to come to any other conclusion than that heterosexuality and homosexuality were not “equally congruous in the created order”.
- Resolution 1:10 of the Lambeth Conference (1998) which:
 - Upheld marriage as the faithful lifelong union of one man and one woman and abstinence is right for all those not called to marriage.
 - Condemned irrational fear of homosexuals, violence in marriage and the trivialization and commercialization of sex.
 - Committed to listening to the experiences of homosexuals but made clear the difference between sexual orientation and sexual practice
 - Stated that all sexual relationships outside marriage, whether heterosexual or between people of the same sex, are regarded as falling short of God’s purposes for human beings.

Appendix 3: The Recommendations of the Pilling Report

The foundation of our report

1. We warmly welcome and affirm the presence and ministry within the Church of gay and lesbian people, both lay and ordained.

On the next steps for the Church of England:

2. The subject of sexuality, with its history of deeply entrenched views, would best be addressed by facilitated conversations or a similar process to which the Church of England needs to commit itself at national and diocesan level. This should continue to involve profound reflection on the interpretation and application of Scripture.
3. Consultation on this report should be conducted without undue haste but with a sense of urgency, perhaps over a period of two years.
4. The Church of England should address the issue of same sex relationships in close dialogue with the wider Anglican Communion and other Churches, in parallel with its own facilitated conversations and on a similar timescale.

On the teaching of the Church and the missiological challenge:

5. Homophobia – that is, hostility to homosexual people – is still as serious a matter as it was and the Church should repent for the homophobic attitudes it has sometimes failed to rebuke and should stand firmly against it whenever and wherever it is to be found.
6. No one should be accused of homophobia solely for articulating traditional Christian teaching on same sex relationships.
7. The Church should continue to pay close attention to the continuing, and as yet inconclusive, scientific work on same sex attraction.
8. Since *Issues in Human Sexuality* was published in 1991 attitudes to same sex attraction, both in English society generally and also among Christians in many parts of the world, have changed markedly. In particular, there is a great deal of evidence that, the younger people are, the more accepting of same sex attraction they are likely to be. That should not of itself determine the Church's teaching.
9. The Church should continue to listen to the varied views of people within and outside the church, and should encourage a prayerful process of discernment to help determine the relationship of the gospel to the cultures of the times.
10. The Church of England needs to recognize that the way we have lived out our divisions on same sex relationships creates problems for effective mission and evangelism within our culture, and that such problems are shared by some other

Churches and in some other parts of the Anglican Communion. The Church of England also needs to recognize that any change to the Church's stance in one province could have serious consequences for mission in some other provinces of the Communion.

11. Whilst abiding by the Church's traditional teaching on human sexuality, we encourage the Church to continue to engage openly and honestly and to reflect theologically on the circumstances in which we find ourselves to discern the mind of Christ and what the Spirit is saying to the Church now.
12. Through a period of debate and discernment in relation to the gospel message in our culture, it is right that all, including those with teaching authority in the church, should be able to participate openly and honestly in that process.

On the Church's pastoral response:

13. The Church needs to find ways of honouring and affirming those Christians who experience same sex attraction who, conscious of the church's teaching, have embraced a chaste and single lifestyle, and also those who in good conscience have entered partnerships with a firm intention of life-long fidelity.
14. 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.
15. The Church's present rules impose a different discipline on clergy and laity in relation to sexually active same sex relationships. In the facilitated conversations it will be important to reflect on the extent to which the laity and clergy should continue to observe such different disciplines.
16. We believe that there can be circumstances where a priest, with the agreement of the relevant PCC, should be free to mark the formation of a permanent same sex relationship in a public service but should be under no obligation to do so. Some of us do not believe that this can be extended to same sex marriage.
17. While the Church abides by its traditional teaching such public services would be of the nature of a pastoral accommodation and so the Church of England should not authorize a formal liturgy for use for this purpose. The House of Bishops should consider whether guidance should be issued.
18. Whether someone is married, single or in a civil partnership should have no bearing on the nature of the assurances sought from them that they intend to order their lives consistently with the teaching of the Church on sexual conduct. Intrusive questioning should be avoided.

Appendix 4: A Better Vision for the Church

From “Biblical and Pastoral Responses to Homosexuality” (EA)

- a. It affirms God’s love and concern for all, whatever their sexuality, recognising we are all sinners whose only hope is in the love of God shown to us in Jesus Christ and poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.
- b. It seeks to be marked by love, truth and grace in ongoing debates, repudiating and regretting all attitudes and actions which victimize or diminish people whose sexual attraction is directed towards people of the same sex or towards people of both sexes.
- c. It commends marriage as an institution lovingly created by God in which one man and one woman enter into an exclusive relationship for life, believing this to be the only form of partnership approved by God for sexual relations and thus the only form of sexual partnership that properly expresses love for God.
- d. It encourages churches to be safe spaces where everyone, including those with same sex attraction or bisexual attraction, is able to share and explore his or her story with fellow believers for mutual encouragement and support as we help each other grow together into maturity in Christ.
- e. It commends and encourages all who experience same sex or bisexual attraction and have committed themselves to chastity by refraining from homoerotic sexual practice, welcoming as leaders those of them God calls to ordination.
- f. It supports all those who responsibly seek to help Christians who experience sexual attractions in conflict with their commitment to live in accordance with biblical teaching, encouraging the Church to offer all Christians counsel and pastoral support to live a chaste life.
- g. It calls on churches to welcome and accept all, whatever their sexuality and whether or not they follow the church’s teaching on sexual behaviour, in the hope that, like all of us who are living outside God's purposes, they will come in due course to see the need to be transformed and live lives of loving obedience in accordance with biblical revelation and orthodox Church teaching.
- h. It calls on churches not to be conformed to the prevailing sexual culture, but to seek to resist and transform it so that both the Church and wider society will flourish by more closely reflecting God’s standards in their beliefs about sexuality and their sexual behaviour.

Appendix 5: A draft PCC Resolution

The PCC of (*name of parish*):

- is committed to welcoming, showing genuine love to, and giving pastoral care to, those who experience same sex attraction just as much as to all people
- repents of ways in which we have failed to show this welcome, love and care, and have through unbiblical and sub-Christian attitudes silenced, hurt and damaged those experiencing same sex attraction
- reaffirms its commitment to the biblical and Anglican understanding of marriage and sexual activity that 'Marriage is in its nature a union permanent and lifelong ... of one man and one woman, to the exclusion of all others on either side' (Canon B30) and that 'Sexual relationships outside marriage, whether heterosexual or between people of the same sex, are regarded as falling short of God's purposes for human beings' (*Marriage: a teaching document of the House of Bishops*)
- desires to engage in dialogue with people experiencing same sex attraction, with a view to mutual understanding, love and pastoral support, but not with a view to changing the biblical and Anglican teaching on marriage and sexual practice, its liturgical practice or its discipline
- affirms those Christians experiencing same sex attraction who, in obedience to Scripture, stay true to this teaching and seeks actively to support them in their determination, often with difficulty, to live a godly and holy life
- seeks to help all who have not in practice followed this teaching, whether in opposite sex or same sex behaviour or relationships, to find forgiveness, and help in their struggle with temptation, in Jesus Christ our Lord
- would regard the permitting of any public or private service to mark the formation or continuation of a sexually active same sex relationship not as a 'pastoral accommodation' but as a direct denial of biblical and Anglican teaching and a deeply divisive change in Anglican practice which would have very serious consequences for the unity of the Church of England and the Anglican Communion
- calls on our Bishops, General Synod and Diocesan Synod members to affirm those parts of the Pilling Report which uphold biblical and Anglican teaching on marriage and sexual activity, and specifically to reject any recommendation that is, or could easily be understood to be, contrary to this biblical and Anglican teaching
- endorses the conclusions of the Dissenting Statement produced by the Bishop of Birkenhead.

Number on Electoral Roll:

Amount of Parish Contribution (*or what the Quota is called in your Diocese*):