

Same sex relationships and equipping lay people

Two Church of England reports hit the headlines in February, in advance of the General Synod sessions held in London during the month. The first, the Bishops' Report on Marriage and Same Sex Relationships (GS2055), received a lot of comment, both before and after its debate, though the second, Setting God's People Free - a report encouraging the growth of lay leadership within the church (GS2056) was perhaps only reported in the church press.

Bishops' Report on Marriage and Same Sex Relationships

This report was the bishops' response to the Shared Conversations that took place from 2015 to 2016 and also at the July 2016 General Synod. The report states that the bishops do not support any change in the Church of England's current teaching on marriage, that marriage is between one man and one woman, nor do they recommend a change to the law allowing same sex marriages or the blessing of same sex relationships to take place in church. However, they will produce a new teaching document on marriage and relationships, and wish to permit an interpretation of the existing law to permit maximum flexibility within it.

The bishops condemned any homophobic practices within the Church of England, so the teaching document will set a tone of welcome and support for all lesbian and gay people. They will also provide guidance for clergy on appropriate pastoral provision to people who experience same-sex attraction.

This report was not welcomed by the LGBTI community, not only because they didn't feel that it went far enough, but also because of the tone within the report which they felt was patronising. It was clear well before the debate that there was a strong movement to vote against the report. Following informal conversations with various

people, the group work that took place during Wednesday afternoon, and the debate itself, I decided to vote not to Take Note, and the report was rejected narrowly by Synod.

Since then, the Archbishops have issued a letter outlining the next moves, which will include the creation of a new teaching document, which will have a wide ranging and fully inclusive approach.

Setting God's People Free

This important document, part of the Renewal and Reform agenda, has as its aim the equipping of the 98% of the Church that are not ordained to be "set free for fruitful, faithful mission and ministry, influence and leadership" in the church. It identifies the need for shifts in culture, recognising the role of lay people, encouraging whole-life discipleship, and recommending clergy and laity to work together in teams. Above all, the report supports our role as Christians in our Monday – Saturday context, at work, at leisure and in our communities. The Archbishop of York suggested that as Christians we need to talk about our faith as much as we talk about the weather!

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