

Pilling Report

The Revd Dr Malcolm Brown addresses Diocesan Synod, 8 February 2014



Thank you Antony¹; thank you Bishop; thank you Synod, for your welcome.

As the introduction said, I was Secretary to the House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality. I was not one of the members, one of the four bishops or three advisers, or the chair, Joe Pilling; and I think, to begin with, a moment's solidarity and thought for Sir Joseph Pilling, who I think would have given almost anything for the report not to be called the Pilling Report. *<laughter>* Unfortunately, 'The House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality' doesn't exactly flow off the tongue.

Antony said earlier, "I didn't know very much about credit unions." I did actually, from long ago. But when I used to teach Christian Ethics in a previous existence, I would begin my course by saying I'd reached the age where I was more interested in money than sex, and so we were going to look at Christian Ethics through the ethics of the market economy and not through homosexuality, and that way I got out of an awful lot of controversy. *<laughter>*

And then it comes round and bites you. *<more laughter>*

So, for the last two years I've been working as Secretary to this very difficult and intense process which reported just before Christmas. My job was to provide briefing papers, to do research and to help produce a report that captured the mind of the group.

At one point, I was asked to produce a paper on sin, and thinking that things had got far too serious, I accepted a bet from a colleague that I wouldn't dare call it 'God Gets Quite Irate' *<laughter>* which, if you're familiar with Monty Python, you'll get the reference.

I don't think any of the working group did. *<loud laughter>*

¹ The Revd Antony MacRow-Wood is Chair of the House of Clergy.

All the same, that was about as light-hearted as it got and, before Christmas, we came up with this report which - I'm sure you've read reports on the report and will know that it - represents not 'the mind' of the Church of England, so much as 'the minds' of the Church of England on this subject. I'll come onto some of that a bit later, but I do think it's been extremely good to have been here for the whole morning as well as the afternoon, because setting this discussion in the context of our mission together is crucially important. An awful lot of people in the Church of England just wish we could move on, shut up, say no more about this divisive subject; but actually, as soon as you start looking at how we 'do mission' in a changing culture, you can't avoid it. It's sad, but you can't: and whichever position you may take, of the many positions on human sexuality and Christian belief, it is a missiological question about how we relate to other people, created in the image of God.

Well, just to capture something of this changing context, previous publications that have emanated from the Church of England, you will only be too familiar with, I'm sure. 'Issues in Human Sexuality', a relatively thin document from 1991. A much thicker report called 'Some Issues in Human Sexuality' - just to confuse the issue, but a very useful resource book - came out in 2003.

We're already more than ten years on from that publication, but if you cast your mind back to 1991, a Conservative government was still operating, having introduced the notorious Section 28, which barred and prohibited all representation of homosexual relationships as in any sense equivalent morally to that of a heterosexual relationship.

That was then. Today, we are on the brink of the first same-sex marriages, and just to rub home how rapid political and social change can be, when the Pilling Group began its work, same-sex marriage may have been a gleam in David Cameron's eye, but it wasn't much more than that. That's how quickly the ground has moved underneath us, even as we tried to do our work.

Against that background, I think it's very important to remember that sexuality is not just about homosexuality. Of course, the latter is what we had to focus on as a working group, because it's the latter question that is most on the agenda for the churches and which causes the most dispute and difficulty, but if you have a chance to read the whole report - and it is on the Church of England website - I do urge you to read the prologue.

One of the advisers to the group, Revd Dr Jessica Martin, has written - well, she wrote as part of the work of the group - a long piece on culture, theology and sexuality. It's called 'Living with Holiness and Desire' and it was felt important enough as a piece of writing that the whole group wanted it to be the prologue, to set the context and to suggest that - whichever position you might take among the many views on gay issues and so on - the idea that our culture has somehow 'got sex right' and the Church is dragging along behind getting it wrong, is a very difficult proposition indeed.

Our whole culture is actually deeply conflicted on a lot of these issues and sometimes the sense that there's a 'social trajectory' - that there is change and it's always onwards and upwards and all we have to do is fall in behind it - really doesn't survive very much scrutiny. So I do commend to you Jessica's prologue to the report.²

Nonetheless: nonetheless, I was present when some of the bishops came out of the House of Lords debate at which the Same Sex Marriage Bill finally went through, and saw the look on their faces, which was captured, I think, very well by Archbishop Justin and, in an address to the General Synod in July last year, he said this, which we quote in the Pilling report:

The cultural and political ground is changing. There is a revolution. Anyone who listened, as I did, to much of the Same Sex Marriage Bill Second Reading Debate in the House of Lords could not fail to be struck by the overwhelming change of cultural hinterland. Predictable attitudes were no longer there. The opposition to the Bill, which included me and many other bishops, was utterly overwhelmed, with amongst the largest attendance in the House

² The Pilling Report page is www.churchofengland.org/our-views/marriage,-family-and-sexuality-issues/human-sexuality/pilling-report.aspx.

and participation in the debate, and majority, since 1945. There was noticeable hostility to the view of the churches.

I am not proposing new policy, but what I felt then and feel now is that some of what was said by those supporting the bill was uncomfortably close to the bone... We may or may not like it, but we must accept that there is a revolution in the area of sexuality, and we have not fully heard it.

I think that's an extremely important quote from Archbishop Justin; and the Pilling Report - almost by accident I think, because we were already on the way to a similar set of conclusions - is very conformable to Archbishop Justin's view.

It is not suggesting new policy. It's not suggesting that the Church changes its teaching. It is proposing that we listen very closely to what is being said to us, not least by the culture around us - which may or may not be right, but is nonetheless the culture in which we are set and in which we have our mission to fulfil; and indeed, the mission of God.

Whatever your view about the Church's policy on sexuality issues - and there are many views, it isn't simply binary - whatever your view, we face a missiological challenge because not only is the weight of public opinion, as expressed in the Lords and in the media, strongly against where the Church is, there is a very radical youth element in that; an age element. The younger you are, the more likely you are to be entirely relaxed and accepting of people with different sexual orientations; different sexual practices.

It also correlates with gender, with women being more relaxed and at ease with those questions than men; such that one of the studies which we reported on in our Report suggests that if you take a young Christian woman and an older Christian man, you're about as far away, on average, as the poles allow you to go.

But it's important to understand - these are revolutions happening within our churches as well, and although there are all sorts of interesting correlations about churchmanship and things like that, the younger members of our churches are shaped in great measure by the culture that they inhabit. So we do have an important set of questions here to look at, whatever we believe about the nature of the issues.

Now, speaking as someone with a background in Christian ethics, I think I probably spent about 18 months of the Pilling process fondly believing that ethicists could solve the problem. I no longer think that ethicists, or anyone else, can solve the problem from the perspective of any particular discipline.

This is about a great deal more than just about what we believe about human sexuality because, in the end, it comes down to Scripture; it comes down to power; it comes down to the question of whether being 'Church' is something which must stand out against the prevailing mores of the times, or whether those times have something to say to us, and that of course is a question that has been faced by Christians since the earliest Church: 'How much can we learn from the context around us and how much must we stand out against it?' And how do we discern what is true? How do we make that judgement about what we're called to be?

I've often said that I think all Christians these days are clear that we are called to be a counter-cultural Church. We just can't agree about which bits of culture to counter. <laughter>

You'll know from the public report - from the media - that the Pilling group was not unanimous in its work, and that the Bishop of Birkenhead, Keith Sinclair produced, within the covers of the report, his own minority statement.

It is important to remember that Bishop Keith agreed that that statement should be within the covers of the book, within the context of the report as a whole. He remained to the end a member of the group. He was as much a member of the group a few weeks ago on Monday - when the

group met for the last time to have dinner together, to wind up its work - as he was when the work began.

The difficulty of having a minority report of any kind is that because most people regard this set of arguments as binary, as being two positions, then if a conservative evangelical put in a minority statement, the rest of the report, surely, must be strongly liberal. That would be to misunderstand the process whereby the group got to where it got.

Joe Pilling in the Chair, with a background of a lifetime of civil service, had a massive investment in trying to bring this to a unanimous conclusion. The report as it stands - the bulk of the report - is a position which a group of - nine altogether - could adopt as far as possible, to try to keep all members on board.

The fact that they didn't, in the end, did mean that one or two members of the group said, 'Well, why don't we go back and write the report we would have written if the Bishop of Birkenhead had not put in a minority report?'

And then they thought, 'No that would be stupid, because what we've done is try, as far as we possibly can, to express a common mind. What is the point of then undoing all that because we've failed to get it into the form where it can be one single mind? It's far better, surely, to show how far we have gone together, even though we couldn't go the last few steps together.'

And so that's what this report is, and to caricature it as 'a report of two halves', as if they represent the two polarities of a divided, binary debate, is misleading. I think if you read the Bishop of Birkenhead's minority statement, you'll find a considerable amount of agreement and overlap, which he himself acknowledges.

Opening the recommendations, 'We warmly welcome and affirm the presence and ministry within the Church of gay and lesbian people, both lay and ordained' was not a contentious recommendation.

The lines that suggest that we should repent of our lack of welcome and acceptance to homosexual people extended in the past, and to demonstrate the unconditional acceptance and love of God in Christ for all people, is not in dispute.

This is a report which represents a considerable process of listening, of attention and yes, of compromise: not only from the members of the group but from the many, many people with whom the group engaged.

I think we spent well over a year in listening.

Some of it, as the report records, was spent in people's homes; listening to gay and lesbian Christians, some of whom were arguing for change, some of whom were arguing for no change in the Church's practice; but sharing their lives in confidence, with us in pairs. I think that's a good Biblical principle, actually: being sent out in pairs, to listen.

Some of it was in a more formal structure, listening to those who represented pressure groups of different kinds and, in some cases, people who the group had decided it wanted to hear from because they had gone on the public record.

I have to say that I didn't find a lot of the listening to groups terribly edifying. We have gone a long way in dispute, as a Church, over these issues and forgive me for sometimes feeling that, with some of those we met, it was a case of 'press the button and hear the speech'.

On different sides of the question we noted, in the group, a real lack of any attempt to persuade us. Instead, people made speeches at us and we concluded that, in all sorts of cases - people arguing quite contradictory things - the argument was nonetheless the same argument, and it went like this:

'I'm right because I'm right because I'm right; and therefore you are wrong, and bad.'

Sometimes, these issues which we have rehearsed so often are so patently clear - to us - that the idea that someone may read the same Scriptures, pray to the same God, identify the same Christ and the same Holy Spirit at work in their lives and come to different conclusions, is almost beyond imagining; and the depth of deafness into which the so-called 'arguments' had fallen was really a very depressing thing to sit through for quite so long.

Let me just tackle, very quickly if I may, some of the - I believe - misconceptions that have arisen since the report was published.

We were very struck by some of the well-known groups that have well-known views on this subject, whose first response on their website was to say, 'Let us read this carefully before we opine.' Thank goodness there are those who still want to read what is said before their knees jerk. Others, I'm afraid, were less reticent: but nevertheless, let's just pick up some of the criticisms.

Many people criticised the report for its relatively brief treatment of Scripture; for its relatively shallow treatment of theology; and for its relatively superficial treatment of the science behind sexuality.

I have to say that if we had done justice to any of those disciplines, you would have had a multi-volume work in front of you. Millions of words have been uttered, committed to print and otherwise put into the public domain.

What we had to conclude - and if you look at the two Appendices on Scripture, you'll see why we couldn't come to a single position - was that many people believe that if only you study the Scriptures a bit harder, the answer would be clear. But the Appendices - one from the Bishop of Birkenhead, one from the Revd David Runcorn - show that prayerfully approaching Scripture has not brought Christians to one mind on these issues.

Similarly with theology. There are many, many books of theology and about sexuality, but they don't resolve anything for you: and the idea that a bit more study, another book, would somehow press the magic button and get us off the hook, is just fantasy.

Unfortunately, scholars of all sorts look first - it seems - at what their commitments are before they read each others' books. So; 'Well, we don't trust him because we know where he's coming from,' or 'We don't trust her because we know where she's coming from'; and it feels like a dialogue of the deaf.

And what fascinated us as a group was that when we met scientists, they were the same. If you are seduced for one moment by Richard Dawkins and his friends into thinking that science gives you objective data on which to make moral judgements, come and listen to scientists talking about sexuality. <laughter> Every one of them has a bundle of research papers in his briefcase. None of them have the same research papers in their briefcase.

It's just not going to happen that any discipline, secular or theological, is going to find the magic bullet that resolves this question so that every Christian says, "Gosh! So that's it." It ain't gonna work. So if our report was deficient in those disciplines, it was because we knew we could go on forever and move us not one jot.

Let me just pick up one other criticism of the report: that we said that Scripture was unclear. That accusation's been made several times. We did not say that Scripture is unclear: you will not find those words in the report. What we have said is that prayerful Christians, approaching Scripture equally seriously as far as we could see, came to different conclusions about the implications of Scripture for the Church today. That is a rather different thing from criticising Scripture.

And one other thing that we immediately lost the battle on: we nowhere commend to the Church the practice of "blessing" same-sex relationships. We avoided that word scrupulously. The media had had the report for, I think, ten minutes before it was quite clear the story was going to be 'Church Blesses Same Sex Unions.'

We chose our words carefully because we recognise the close connection between the Church's practice and the Church's teaching. What we bless, matters; and we know that Christians are divided on this. There's a quote somewhere: the Archbishop of York's comment to the effect that, "It's rather odd that we have a Church that will bless a tree or a sheep, but not a faithful human relationship."

But we weren't going down that route.

The report recommends that where Christian people have decided, in good conscience, to enter into a faithful, stable same-sex relationship, as indeed the laity have been permitted to do since 'Issues in Human Sexuality' in 1991, that those clergy and PCCs [*Parochial Church Councils*] who feel so called to do should be able to make some public recognition of that relationship. That is not quite the same as a blessing and, although it may seem like splitting hairs, getting angels to dance on the heads of pins and so on, it's a distinction that the group wanted to maintain.

And the phrase here that is contentious but important, drawn from the report, is the phrase "pastoral accommodation". Pastoral accommodation is a very difficult concept, as Professor Oliver O'Donovan, who first mentioned it to the group, acknowledged: that, as he said, we do so believe in the Church that everything we do and say has to somehow capture the perfection of God in all sorts of ways, but pastoral situations - as any pastor, lay or ordained, knows - are messy. And sometimes you have to just recognise that this is how things are and let the doctrine catch up, perhaps, because there's a pastoral need that must be met.

What we are recommending in the report, and I say "we" - I shouldn't really say "we", but you get totally identified as someone who's worked for a group for two years - what the report is recommending is that that should be considered.

Now, I have to say there's a process among the bishops, in the Church at large, and as it felt this is taken in many ways as a kind of *carte blanche* for any practice to begin now, it should not be. There is much more to be said before we know where the Church is going.

<pause>

The core of the report's recommendations may have felt to a lot of people when we first read them like, you know - the phrase was used by many people - 'kicking the can down the road'. I used to quite enjoy kicking a can down the road: it gave you something to do on a boring Sunday afternoon, but the facilitated conversations that are recommended here are absolutely crucial to what the group understood, by the end of its work, that its task was.

We had become very clear that, even if we had set off two years before, thinking that we could produce a form of words that would unite the Church of England - let alone the Anglican Communion, let alone all the other churches, around a single set of beliefs and practices, as if we could somehow 'solve it with a document' - well, if we'd thought that, we'd be in cloud-cuckoo land.

The divisions within Christ's Church go extremely deep on this and, as I said before, it is absolutely crucial to our mission to the world that we don't let that tear us to pieces; nor do we let it stop us proclaiming the good news of Christ.

'Facilitated conversations' was one of those phrases that you can imagine a group of people in committee going round and round, trying to go 'What on earth are we going to call this? You know, if it looks like a facilitated conversation, if it smells like a facilitated conversation, well it's probably the best phrase we can come up with.'

What we mean is something like what we experienced. Sitting attentively; refusing to get up and walk because we're offended; refusing to say that our interlocutor is not a Christian, despite them proclaiming it as their faith; but listening to see why and how the image of Christ is at work in them, even though we believe profoundly that they're wrong.

That is a heck of a call. It's also quite difficult in the light of the Lambeth Conference Resolutions about the listening to the experience of gay and lesbian people. This is not that. Some dioceses have done that very well, others have done it not at all, some have had a half-hearted bash at it but what the group, the Pilling Group, is recommending is something somewhat different.

It's addressing not our lack of understanding of gay and lesbian people's experience, but our lack of understanding of the authentic voice of Christ in each other.

<slight pause>

Now, there's been a lot of anxiety about the facilitated conversations. One website, having said, 'Well they sound fine in theory', said 'Well of course, all the facilitators will be liberals, so they won't work.' But ah, that's very interesting because we haven't decided how they're going to work at all, let alone who's going to be the facilitators.

Others have said, 'Well of course, no one's going to go into a facilitated conversation and admit to be gay, especially if they're a bishop.'

Ah, really? We'll see. We aren't there yet. Amazing how many people want to offset before the thing has even been conceived: so that it can't be too threatening, presumably. But it is threatening, because attentive listening tends to be that, I feel.

There is a process for putting them together, but I want to stress - if you happen to have the Report, and I see one or two people thumbing it - paragraph 66, because an awful lot of people feel that going into a facilitated conversation is to walk in, as it were, to the lion's den in order to be changed. We say in paragraph 66:

We do not regard the trajectory of any process of attentive listening, or facilitated conversation, to be a foregone conclusion. If we presumed that there was only one desirable direction of travel, we would not only be subverting our own professed desire to see stronger bonds of sympathy between Christians who disagree but we would be contradicting our own approach to reading cultural trends...

In the Report, we have said it's a mistake to see cultural trends as inexorable. Just because society seems to be going in one direction does not mean that society will always and inevitably go in that same direction. Things happen. Opinions change. People move on. And so, if we were to say that a facilitated conversation was about gradually trying to bring every liberal back into line so that they agreed with the conservative position, or accepted the current practices of a Church *in toto* and never were asked for change again-

Or if we took the opposite line and said 'It's about wearing away the existence of conservatives until we just roll over and give in'-

If we were to take either of those lines over facilitated conversations, we would be doing violence to what we've already said in the Report about reading the signs of the times. The signs of the times are not always written up in big neon letters, because the times can change.

Paragraph 66, therefore, is really important and I'm very sad that it hasn't been stressed, in my view, as much as it should have been because so many people, it seems, have had their own interests in either not wanting to get involved in facilitated conversations, or to get across the implication from the beginning that there was a direction to such conversations.

We need to go on saying again and again: this is about listening attentively for the mind of Christ in one another.

<pause>

As I think was mentioned in the introduction by Bishop Nicholas, the task of putting a process together for the Church of England on this and liaising with others in the Communion and our

ecumenical partners is being headed by Canon David Porter, the Archbishop's Secretary for Reconciliation. I do know that others of us will be involved in that.

As someone with a background in adult education, I very much hope that a process will be properly piloted; the snags taken out of it. It's so easy to produce what looks like a process for neutrality and process for listening, where actually you touch a red button by mistake and set off the dynamite. This is territory which is probably like the control deck of a nuclear submarine, which I've never been on, but you imagine red buttons everywhere; and catastrophe should you touch any of them.

<pause>

I want to end, really, with a very clear - explanation, perhaps? - of facilitated conversations. What we're trying to do with this.

We're trying, first of all, to acknowledge that the Body of Christ is broken: on this issue as, perhaps, a test case. Perhaps it's something that runs much deeper than just sexuality. As I say, I don't think it's about ethics.

I think, in the end, it's about things fundamental to our faith; and Christians in this country and Christians in other countries are divided; and if we get it wrong, we will have made a very major error. We will either be denying the love of God as it really is, or we'll be proclaiming a gospel that is misleading and treats people as if their immortal souls don't matter.

If people have said to me, "Gosh, why can't we talk about something else other than sex?" I have to remind myself that sex is actually quite important; but also that, as the Church of God, we believe not just that people should get it right and be happy, but that their immortal souls matter.

And it's with that sense of gravity that we want to commend to the whole Church of England a process of conversation which will enable us to hear what Christ is saying in those with whom we disagree.

The easy answer is simply to say that those we disagree with are wrong, and bad. I think that there are many signs that the Church of England does not want to say that to anyone.

It will take time. We, rather optimistically perhaps in the Report, said a process of around two years. It might take quite a long time before that process begins. It means that, as a Church, we've got to live with this, and with the pain, for quite a long time.

<pause>

Some of us have got to start thinking now about how we set this up so that it really works; so that it isn't wasting time; so that it isn't just going through the motions of presentations of one view or another view, with ears firmly covered.

And so, I wanted to use this opportunity to encourage you to do a little bit of talking among yourselves, because you've listened to me for long enough, and to - in the usual small buzz groups - just address the question:

What sort of conditions for conversation do you think would allow the depth of our difference to be really understood and still allow for the vision of the face of Christ to be visible in the people we talk with?

What would be the kind of conditions that would allow that to happen? You could go in all sorts of directions with that question. I'm not going to suggest we have a formal feedback. You might want to feed some of it back; you might just want to hold onto things you discuss for when you, as a diocese, decide to take your place in the facilitated conversations that will follow.

So, could I suggest that we do those buzz groups for a short while? And after, when Antony's called you all back to order, I'd be very happy to take any questions you may have, if I can possibly

answer them. As I say, I don't suggest we have formal feedback of your findings, but it might just set the ground for when you begin to do this in earnest.

Thank you.

<loud applause>