

The Bishop of Gloucester

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Dear brothers and sisters,

Participating in shared conversation on scripture, mission and human sexuality

“I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all”

Ephesians 4:1-6

I would like to bring to your attention the information and resources which are now available on the diocesan website to enable people to engage in shared conversation and Bible study, hopefully with people who hold different theological views regarding human sexuality and same-sex relationships: www.gloucester.anglican.org/shared-conversations-on-scripture-mission-and-human-sexuality

We all know that there are a number of different perspectives and that it is never easy to listen to those whom we consider to be wrong. Yet, as we talk and reflect it is vital to remember that this is about each other's lives - people who are our brothers and sisters in Christ. We therefore need to come to this with a strong commitment to listen to God as the Holy Spirit works within us and between us as we listen to one another.

There is an introduction to the resources on the web page and I thought it might be helpful to repeat some of it here:

What's this all about?

In November 2013 the report of the church's working group on Human Sexuality (generally referred to as 'The Pilling Report') recommended that the subject *“with its history of deeply entrenched views, would be best addressed by facilitated conversations ... to which the Church of England needs to commit itself at national and diocesan level”*. In response to this recommendation, the C of E has undertaken a process of Shared Conversations over the last two years across three circles: the College of Bishops, Regionally and with members of General Synod. The key question on which the church has reflected in these conversations is: **Given the significant changes in our culture in relation to human sexuality, how should the Church respond?**

You can find out a lot more about this process at www.sharedconversations.org

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The aim was that the diversity of views in the church would be expressed honestly and heard respectfully so that individuals might come to discern that which is of Christ in those with whom they profoundly disagree. Neither the process of conversation, nor any of those who facilitated it, has any authority in the decision-making of the Church.

The House of Bishops, having participated in its own conversation and the General Synod conversation reflected further on the issues and brought a report with their initial thoughts to the General Synod in February 2017. (See Resources section of the webpage) The report received a very good debate with different views vigorously expressed but the Synod voted not to take note of the report. However, the work on this issue continues and the two Archbishops set out proposed next steps in a letter the day after the debate.

The House of Bishops' report can be found at www.churchofengland.org/media/3863472/gs-2055-marriage-and-same-sex-relationships-after-the-shared-conversations-report-from-the-house-of-bishops.pdf and the Archbishops' letter at <https://staging.churchofengland.org/media/3878263/abc-and-aby-joint-letter.pdf>

What have we done locally?

Gloucester Diocese has already been involved in several ways:

- Bishop Rachel was a member of the group that prepared the Pilling report and took part in the House of Bishops conversation.
- A small group of people from the diocese participated in the South West regional Shared Conversation in April 2015 and a report of their reflections on that experience was circulated to Diocesan Synod in February 2016.
- All the diocesan General Synod representatives took part in the conversation at General Synod in July 2016 and some of them spoke briefly about their experience of that process at the Diocesan Synod in November 2016. All the representatives attended the February 2017 General Synod.
- The Diocesan Synod in February 2017 (prior to the meeting of the General Synod) provided the opportunity for people to listen to some of those who hold very different theological perspectives.

The invitation now is for those who wish to do so to set up their own Shared Conversation. The webpage offers a range of ideas about ways to share the reflection going on across the Church and tells you about the resources available to support shared conversation and Bible study. I commend this to you with my prayers.

Yours faithfully,

Bishop Rachel