

## Shared Conversations on Scripture, Mission and Human Sexuality - Information and Ideas if you want to join in

### 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](http://www.sharedconversations.org)

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. 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 <https://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?

The Diocese of Gloucester 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

### **What else is going to happen?**

Bishop Rachel has spoken at Diocesan Synod about her hope that we could offer ways for those who wish to do so, from across the Diocese, to join in this national Shared Conversation. The rest of this webpage offers a range of ideas about ways to share the reflection going on across the church and tells you about resources available to support any activities that people want to get involved in.

### **Mutual Respect and Confidentiality**

As with the main Shared Conversations, whatever conversations take place in the Diocese remain confidential to those who take part; there's no feedback expected. It's simply an opportunity to reflect together, to share thoughts and perceptions without any expectation that a shared view will be arrived at or that anyone will change his or her mind as a result. Applying the approach used nationally of promoting the honest expression of views that are heard respectfully is key to a successfully conversation.

A common way of dealing with confidentiality is to apply the "Chatham House Rule" which is that participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed. So you might say "a view was expressed that..." or "we discussed the idea that..." but not "xx said that s/he thought..."

See also the section on Getting a group organised about this.

### **Some options for taking part**

Different approaches will suit different people and situations, so this section just tries to set out some of the options for joining in these reflections.

#### ***"I'd just like to think about it..."***

If you'd just like to spend some time on your own thinking through some of the issues, then there are various online and published resources that might help you with this. You can find a full list in the resources section below, but for example:

- there are some theological viewpoints which you may find a good starting point
- several books were distributed to General Synod members before their conversation and those are identified in the resources list
- other relevant books are also identified in the resources list
- the Shared Conversation website as above

- various blogs were written about individual experiences of the regional conversations

***“We’ve got an existing local group that might spend some time on this...”***

In that case there is some guidance in the section on Getting a group organised about what you might need to do in preparation to have a fruitful conversation, and the resources section will be very relevant for you. There are some different approaches possible:

- some brief shared reading beforehand and then an open conversation, this could include the opportunity for people to bring to the conversation a verse or passage from Scripture, which is important to them in shaping their approach
- a book group approach where you all agree to read one or more of the shorter books or other materials available and focus your discussion in that way
- your own group’s general working style

It will be important, if the group is led by anyone other than the incumbent of your benefice, to let them know that you are planning to cover this topic in your group, in case anyone subsequently wants to talk to any of the ministry team about it.

***“I’d like to promote a local conversation, but I’m not sure how to go about it...”***

In that case your first step will need to be thinking about how to publicise your proposed group and whether you want to work with another person in your local area to organise it together. It will be important, if the group is led by anyone other than the incumbent of your benefice, to let them know that you are planning these discussions, in case anyone subsequently wants to talk to any of the ministry team about it.

There are some different approaches possible:

- some brief shared reading beforehand and then an open conversation
- a book group approach where you all agree to read one or more of the shorter books or other materials available and focus your discussion in that way
- you may have other experience of group discussion that you can apply

It’s possible that some people in the Diocese will want to join a conversation but may not have a group available in their area. If you would be happy to offer them an opportunity to join your group then please let the Mission and Ministry Department know what your plans are so that they can make the link. The contact person in the Department is: The Revd Pauline Godfrey, [pgodfrey@glosdioc.org.uk](mailto:pgodfrey@glosdioc.org.uk); 01452 835548.

***“I’d like to join in a conversation but I don’t know where there is one taking place...”***

We have asked anyone who is organising a conversation, who is happy to open it to others beyond their local community, to inform the Mission and Ministry Department so that they can link you to a group. Please do therefore contact Pauline Godfrey in that Department to find out what may be available for you. The Revd Pauline Godfrey: [pgodfrey@glosdioc.org.uk](mailto:pgodfrey@glosdioc.org.uk); 01452 835548.

## **Getting a group organised**

As with any group discussion, it's important to prepare well for the meeting(s) and that's certainly the case with sensitive topics like this one.

How you handle some of these points will depend on whether your group is already established or starting from scratch, but preparation needs to include:

- thinking about the best number of participants – somewhere between 7 and 12 is usually ideal, so you might want to think about linking with another group if your numbers are very small or having more than one group if there's a lot of interest
- developing a clear description of the aims of the group
- deciding whether this will be a one-off discussion or a series of meetings – several well-spaced sessions might be good to allow for time for personal reflection in-between, but a single session might equally be a more workable start for a group; it can always agree to meet again!
- deciding what your “ground rules” will be, for example about confidentiality, how long the meeting will be, the level of commitment hoped for if it's a series of meetings, the principle of respectful listening
- how to introduce these rules at the start of your discussions
- identifying a venue that will feel private, comfortable and neutral to help to put people at ease
- thinking about how, if your group turns out to be largely of one mind on the issue, members can “hear” other views either from literature or websites identified in the Resources section
- the role of the person convening the group as facilitator:
  - establishing a safe, neutral atmosphere and keeping the conversation within the agreed parameters
  - reminding participants about the importance of self-care including the need for individuals to have someone with whom they can talk if participation in a conversation raises difficult issues
  - noting to the group that in ‘places of difference’ group members need to be particularly alert to the vulnerabilities of other group members and the importance of mutual care and respect

Our assumption is that people convening groups will generally be the facilitator. However, an external facilitator may be able to be provided to work alongside a local host if you are really concerned about taking on this role. If there is a particular concern about an individual or about how a group is running then please feed this back to the Mission and Ministry Department, either to Pauline Godfrey or to the Director of the Department, Andrew Braddock ([abraddock@glosdioc.org.uk](mailto:abraddock@glosdioc.org.uk); 01452 835549).

## **Structures for group conversations**

This section has some suggestions for you to consider about how you will structure your group conversations. Feel free to pick and choose!

### **(i) Sample running order for a group session / series**

Assuming that whatever materials you are using have been made available in advance:

- Introduction to the topic and its scope
- Ground rules
- A look at both scripture and other influences on our thinking/ feeling/ believing, acknowledging that some influences are cultural/personal and not just obvious, either way, from scripture
- Discussion of the materials the group has read in preparation
- Group members' experience/evidence of how the church looks from outside, and discussion of the consequences of action/inaction
- Discussion of how to disagree well
- At the end, what people are taking away from the conversation

### **(ii) Possible starter questions for discussions**

#### ***In response to a book or blog***

What do you have in common with the writer?

Where do you differ?

Can you understand how they came to their views on this subject?

What questions would you want to ask them?

How would you relate to this person if they attended your church?

How could you love and care for them?

How would you want them to love and care for you?

#### ***General starters***

Is this something that's been on your mind or that of others in your church that you're aware of?

What do you think the views of people in your local community on gay relationships are?

How do you think they view the church's position on civil partnerships and gay marriage?

How might that affect the church's mission?

What do you think might happen as a result of the different positions held in the church about human sexuality?

What might be possible ways forward?

### **(iii) The Inclusive Church Study Guide outline**

Inclusive Church has published a Small Group Study Guide to accompany its book on this topic and it can be downloaded from <http://inclusive-church.org/sexuality>. It offers a very complete structure, including a short liturgy to introduce and end the discussion sessions and you could use it all or in part.

### **(iv) The Book Group Approach**

- Organiser identifies two short books from different perspectives
- Group members commit to reading both books before the session
- First date fixed well ahead to allow plenty of time for reading
- Open discussion at the session but the organiser would still need to be willing to play a facilitating/neutral role

## **Resources**

### **1. Church of England publications**

The Church of England has produced several formal reports which looked at human sexuality. These include:

- **The Pilling Report** (2013) This can be [downloaded](#) for free or [purchased](#) in hard copy
- **Some Issues in Human Sexuality** (2003) – A discussion document from the House of Bishops' Group on *Issues in Human Sexuality*, which can be [downloaded here](#)

- **Being Human: A Christian Understanding of Personhood Illustrated with Reference to Power, Money, Sex and Time**, a report by the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England (2003) which can be downloaded [here](#)

## 2. Shared Conversation materials

Some materials have been produced specifically around the Shared Conversation process.

- **Report to Gloucester Diocesan Synod February 2016** – reflections by the diocesan participants in the regional Shared Conversation
- **Presentations to General Synod** - As part of the final Shared Conversation with General Synod members, a panel of three speakers addressed theological and scriptural aspects of human sexuality, each from their own distinct personal perspective, informed by their scholarship in this area. Their notes of these presentations can be found below at the links below:
  - [Andrew Goddard](#)
  - [Loveday Alexander](#)
  - [Robert Song](#)

## 3. External Resources

A great deal has been written from a wide range of theological perspectives on the topic of human sexuality. Below are articles, books and other resources which we are aware of. They are offered to enable people to engage with the spectrum of thought and approaches to the issue, but none are endorsed by the Church of England or the organisers of the Shared Conversations, nor is the list exhaustive. Some of the books listed below do not deal exclusively (or even principally) with human sexuality, but are offered because the perspective they present is relevant to the Shared Conversations.

They are of varying length and technicality and a brief introduction is included, taken from the publications.

### *Online*

- The main **Shared Conversation** website [www.sharedconversations.org](http://www.sharedconversations.org)
- A set of resources from **EGGS** (Evangelical Group on General Synod) are available [here](#)
- The [website](#) of **Accepting Evangelicals** has a series of articles on the Bible as well as personal stories and a section on transgender issues.
- The website of **Modern Church – Liberal Faith in a changing world** <https://modernchurch.org.uk/> has articles, comments and other statement on this topic