

## **BISHOPS STATEMENT ON CIVIL PARTNERSHIPS**

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In late July, not long after the General Synod had closed and long before the next one was due to meet, the House of Bishops issued a pastoral statement regarding Civil Partnerships (CPs). The statement addresses four main issues:

- The Church's response to this development and its teaching about marriage.
- The practicalities of whether civil partnerships can take place in Church or whether a service of prayer and dedication should take place.
- Implications where a clergyman or woman enters into a CP.
- Implications where lay people enter into a CP and of ministering to lay people in such relationships.

As is well known the House of Bishops is utterly divided on moral issues (and most other things). Since some Bishops had argued actively in favour of CPs in the House of Lords expectations for this statement were already low.

### **Church's teaching about marriage**

The statement opens reasonably well with a reiteration of the Church's teaching on marriage, and, in particular 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* (Section 4).

From this point on however the statement is both confused and confusing, a point well highlighted in the media reports.

The report manifestly fails in not rebuking same-sex intercourse and by not discouraging Christians from entering into CPs.

What everyone sees in the statement is deep hypocrisy because the Church teaches one thing but allows, even encourages, people to do another. The hypocrisy is compounded when clergy are even permitted to teach that sin is acceptable, so long as they do not engage in sin themselves (Section 22). I am reminded of the rebuke of the Lord Jesus in Matthew chapter 15 verse 8 *These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honour Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me.*

### **Conducting ceremonies**

It is important to consider to what extent CPs are the same as marriage or not. If the legislation had simply permitted same-sex marriage then this would have required that such same-sex marriages be conducted in the established Church. However, in strict legal terms a CP is not a marriage. This means that legislation relating to marriage does not relate to CPs unless specifically changed. At present there is therefore, apparently, no requirement to permit the registration of CPs in a Church service.

It should also be said that even if the law had provided for same-sex marriages the Church would be bound to reject this since marriage is a creation ordinance. In marriage a man and woman become one flesh, no same sex relationship can ever be this.

The fact that a CP is not a marriage forms a large part of the defence of CPs in the Bishops statement. However, in part their argument rests on the honesty and integrity of the government, for, *"The Government has stated that it has no intention of introducing 'same-sex marriage'."* In fact although CPs are not a legal form of marriage there has been a deliberate attempt to make them

as similar to marriage as possible. The Bishops argue that there are differences particularly in that non-consummation and infidelity are not grounds for annulment of CPs. The alternative way of understanding this difference is that no-one expects such relationships to be embarked on before consummation and the government sees nothing fundamentally wrong with infidelity whether in CPs or marriage.

If there is no issue as yet regarding marriage ceremonies there will be pressure for a service of “blessing” (or rather prayer and dedication) after a CP registration. On this point the Bishops merely quote a letter from the Anglican Primates of 2003 and say that they believe CofE practice should reflect this:

*... there is no theological consensus about same sex unions. Therefore, we as a body cannot support the authorisation of such rites*

This was an entirely inadequate statement because it would not rule out the use of unauthorised rites and suggests the question is still unresolved. The Bishops do go on to say that clergy should not provide services of blessing for those who register a civil partnership but then confuse the matter by allowing that prayer for such a relationship can be offered dependent upon the circumstances of each case. This will provide a loophole, which some clergy will exploit ruthlessly. Furthermore, if a clergyman should make a business out of conducting such services the statement will provide no basis for taking action against him. The failure to oppose CPs outright has created these problems.

The confusion on this point and what follows has been well reported in the media. Part of the reason for this confusion is that the Bishops are talking about two different things, and they do not always distinguish between them.

- First are those CPs where the couple are actively homosexual.
- Secondly are those CPs where the couple do not intend to engage in homosexual sex.

The Bishops wish to allow the possibility of the latter but not the former. But, in order to maintain this distinction the whole thing becomes absurd. This is again a consequence of focussing far too much on the sinful act and not enough on the heart and on false teaching. We must call Christians not to enter into CPs because they are in themselves wrong, intended to encourage immoral behaviour and clearly a mockery of marriage. By failing to oppose CPs absolutely the Bishops get into a complete mess.

### **Clergy**

The Bishops are prepared for clergy to enter into a CP provided that “*the person concerned is willing to give assurances to his or her bishop that the relationship is consistent with the standards for the clergy set out in Issues in Human Sexuality*”. In other words they must give assurances that their relationship is non-sexual. These assurances would have to be public, otherwise they will not avert scandal. To date, however, many of the Bishops have in fact hidden behind *Issues* and refused to pry into the private lives of clergy. This provision would only be meaningful if the clergyman or woman concerned was prepared to sign a written statement, which was then made public. Those who are scandalised by this are likely to be those with something to hide. But what will the Bishops do if someone simply refuses to sign?

It would be far simpler to say that any clergy who enter into a CP must resign their office and that anyone in a CP cannot be ordained. Anything else will not work and will discredit the Church and its witness to the world.

## **Laity**

Again in considering the question of laity the Bishops fall back on the Issues report insisting that whilst the Church should hold out the ideal it should not take action against those who do not match up to that. This matter is so crucial that it is worth quoting the whole section:

*23. The House considers that lay people who have registered civil partnerships ought not to be asked to give assurances about the nature of their relationship before being admitted to baptism, confirmation and communion. Issues in Human Sexuality made it clear that, while the same standards apply to all, the Church did not want to exclude from its fellowship those lay people of gay or lesbian orientation who, in conscience, were unable to accept that a life of sexual abstinence was required of them and instead chose to enter into a faithful, committed relationship.*

There are two parts to this which are bad enough taken separately but put together in this way they are a hideous betrayal of Christian truth.

The first sentence concerns the admission of people to baptism, confirmation and communion. On its own the Bishops are arguing that someone in a CP should not be asked to give any assurances about the nature of their relationship. However, if someone is in a CP it is perfectly reasonable to conclude that they are actively homosexual. Anglican doctrine (for example the preface to the Communion Service) would require that a minister consider excluding someone from the Lord's Table. Admittedly discipline has virtually broken down in the Church, yet the Bishops are arguing that the question should never be asked, thus they flatly contradict the doctrine they have sworn to uphold.

Now consider the second statement which reiterates the arguments of *Issues*. What is meant by the phrase 'exclude from its fellowship'. Evangelicals are regularly accused of being unloving, exclusivist and so on (though discipline is an act of love and the failure of discipline is to be unloving). Yet I would never wish to deprive people of the opportunity to hear Christian teaching, or to receive pastoral care and help. As Anglicans we do not exclude people from our public services. Knowing this the Bishops clearly mean something more. Coming on the heels of the statement about baptism, confirmation and communion it is reasonable to conclude that this is what they are talking about – admitting someone into full membership and fellowship at the Lord's table. But think about what this means.

The Bishops have already said that sexual intercourse belongs within marriage alone. But someone who openly rejects this and lives in open sin is to be admitted to baptism and confirmation. Thus they are encouraged to perjure themselves when asked to 'repent of their sins' or alternatively the Church is to collude in the deception that their behaviour is not sinful. Either way this is a scandalous proposal.

## **Conclusion**

After a promising start the Bishops statement rapidly degenerates. It is not simply a matter of it being a bad statement, it is iniquitous and any Bishop who persists in upholding it as a standard of Christian behaviour is clearly unfit to exercise the office. How can we be seen to undermine marriage in this way and to encourage people into open sin?

We are grateful to God that one Bishop at least was prepared to go public in lambasting the statement, sadly it is not a member of the English House of Bishops but Archbishop Peter Akinola of Nigeria who appeared to call for the Church of England to be suspended from the Anglican Communion.