

24th January 2020

Dear Bishop,

I am writing to you in respect of the House of Bishops pastoral statement issued this week. Certainly the House of Bishops needed to clarify whether clergy were to be allowed to bless mixed sex civil partnerships. The statement said they were not allowed and that was disappointing, but not unexpected.

However there were several things in the pastoral statement that did concern me.

Firstly, significant amounts of the statement were just 'copied and pasted' straight from the 2005 HOB statement when civil partnerships were first introduced. This means that the Pilling Report, the Regional Shared Conversations, three years of studying material for LLF and literally decades of 'listening' have had no impact on church understanding of committed relationships. Society has moved on and new forms of relationships and identities exist but the HOB has shown no corresponding theological development so it has nothing to say to society. It is time for the passive listening to stop and a strategy of active engagement and dialogue is urgently needed.

Secondly, the definition of marriage in the Church of England is defined by canon B30, but the HOB has unilaterally redefined marriage. Only General Synod has the power to amend the canons, so this new definition is ultra vires. Why is the HOB choosing to add the phrase 'making a public commitment to each other' to the definition?

Thirdly, the idea that the fundamental difference between a marriage and a civil partnership is the making of vows (paragraph 32) is just flawed. Every civil partnership ceremony I have ever been to had vows, everyone I know in a civil partnership had vows. Legally the vows are not mandatory in a civil partnership, but that does not mean that they are absent. The idea that 'converting a marriage into a civil partnership thus implies the repudiation of a couple's marriage vows' is just an episcopal fantasy. The idea that someone converting their marriage to a civil partnership should be disciplined for breaking their marriage vows is wrong on every level and paragraph 34 should be withdrawn immediately.

This is a document that is legalistic rather than theological and it is certainly not pastoral. It totally lacks any consideration of love between a couple or the quality of their relationship. It also fails to consider Jesus or the Bible. The House of Bishops should be embarrassed by this document, it damages your credibility. With the LLF materials due to be published this year, let's hope there is some engagement and learning to come.

Yours Sincerely,