

Dear Bishop Michael and members of the Lichfield College of Bishops,

Thank you very much for letting me see an early copy of the new Ad Clerum on 'Welcoming and honouring LGBT+ People' in the Diocese. I very much appreciated the pastoral sensitivity and thoughtfulness with which it was written and, like you, would want to work for a situation where people of any sexual orientation or gender identity feel welcomed and honoured in our churches. We do indeed need to model God's welcome and care for all people and challenge any perception that this is not the case in our churches. Thank you too for all the work that has gone into the listening group.

It is, of course, vital that in our pastoral care we seek to reflect God's goodness as it is revealed to us in Scripture. I thoroughly endorsed your advice that our ethical and theological views should not be concealed, although we all need to tread gently when we express them. You conclude your letter by urging that debates be conducted in a spirit of love, mutual care and respect - and I trust this will also mark our overall approach to pastoral care.

However, I thought it might be helpful if I outlined a few concerns that arise in relation to the Ad Clerum, since some of these have a clear bearing on the advice I seek to give to clergy in parishes to which I minister. The first of these is connected with the issue of repentance. While I recognise that your Ad Clerum does not seek to deal with contested theological or ethical questions, the expressed doctrinal position of the Church does contain within it important pastoral imperatives. Canon B30 speaks of marriage between a man and a woman as the Lord's provision for 'the hallowing and right direction of the natural instincts and affections.' The 1987 General Synod motion, which remains the Church of England's official position, speaks of the need for all sexual relationships outside marriage to be met with a call to repentance and the exercise of compassion. I do therefore encourage clergy to be compassionate and sensitive in dealing with the issue of repentance, but nevertheless to see it as an important part of their pastoral care.

This issue comes into focus when considering the question of participation in the Sacraments. Your letter mentions the need to let all people know that there is a place at the table for them. As part of the national church, I would fully agree that we want to encourage everyone to participate in the life of the church to the maximum extent possible. However, I wonder whether the reference to 'a place at the table' for all might be taken by some to imply encouragement for all to participate in Holy Communion. This understanding would create a tension with the BCP Article 25 distinction between 'worthy' and 'unworthy' participation. One of the practices in many churches is to draw attention to this distinction and to welcome those who have sought to repent and have placed their trust in Christ's atoning work on the cross; it is then up to the individual members of the congregation to decide on their participation. In this respect, the Church of England has always had the practice of 'charitable assumption.'

This approach is, I hope, one which avoids inappropriate 'exclusion' or intrusive questioning. However, there may be some private pastoral discussions where people bring issues to us

which require very gentle probing in order to clarify what is involved. These conversations may well provide opportunities for participants to open the Bible together, and can lead to a number of different conclusions. In some cases they might lead to a decision not to participate in Holy Communion for the time being. In others, there might be enthusiasm for further discipleship development (as has often been the case in my own experience with heterosexual couples enquiring about the baptism of their children). In the case of those with concerns over gender identity, we know that a wide range of issues may be involved and in some cases the suggestion of counselling would be appropriate. I do hope that clergy would be supported in the help they try to give in this respect.

Your advice that nobody should be told that sexual orientation or gender identity in itself makes them unsuitable candidates for leadership in the Church is very helpful. Indeed, the way in which people acknowledge some of the challenges they face in these areas and seek to be faithful to God's Word can be great examples of godliness to all of us. That said, I would hope that those offering for ministry of any sort would see their primary identity as in Christ, rather than these aspects of their personhood. Difficulty arises where potential candidates have active sexual relationships outside marriage which are seen as intrinsic to their identity. In these cases, a fuller exploration of the consequences of discipleship may be needed before a teaching ministry can be considered, and again, I do hope that where clergy have to be involved in these difficult decisions, you would regard my support for them as appropriate.

One of the thoughts your Ad Clerum has prompted is that it might be helpful for the Diocese to be informed about some of the approaches taken in the churches to which I offer ministry about the way they seek to welcome LGBT+ people. I will ask them to let me have any information which might be helpful and I will happily pass this on to you.

With continued thanks for the open way you enable me to be involved in the life of the Diocese and every good wish,

Rod Thomas
Bishop of Maidstone