

FROM THE BISHOP OF OXFORD
The Rt Revd Dr Steven Croft
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13 December 2018

Dear Colleagues

Thank you for expressing some of your concerns about “Clothed with Love” in a joint letter. As bishops we respect and value each of you, the ministry you offer, and your commitment to scripture and the historic tradition of the church. We affirm the courteous and thoughtful way in which you have expressed your concerns. It is good to see your affirmation for so much of what we have written. Your five bullet points would be a welcome statement or code of practice on these issues from PCC’s and parishes in the evangelical tradition. We welcome further debate and conversation in the coming months and would be glad of suggestions about how to take the conversation forward. This brief reply is an initial rather than a full response to the points you have made.

A pastoral letter

“Clothed with love” is intended as a pastoral letter to the Diocese. It is not intended as a theological statement of a position or as a contribution in itself to the wider debate in the Church. It is primarily intended to commend love and care for one another in the midst of a challenging period in the Church of England’s ongoing conversation on sexuality. It was written primarily to address the significant sense of hurt and exclusion felt by LGBTI+ Christians and their families, whom we all recognise as our sisters and brothers in Christ. We have received many moving and positive responses to the letter and it has helped each of us to have significant pastoral conversations.

The use of the term LGBTI+ is used following the pattern set by the national conversations around Living in Love and Faith. Nothing more is implied by the language.

The Church of England’s policy on admission to the sacraments is contained in the Canons by which we are all bound, in Issues in Human Sexuality and in the House of Bishops Guidelines on same sex marriage. Our letter is consistent with that policy.

“Direction of travel”

You describe your overriding concern as the “direction of travel” which the Diocese is taking. Perhaps we can offer some reassurance in two areas here. There is no desire on our part to diminish support for those who are seeking to uphold and to live within the Church of England’s current teaching. We have specifically included a commitment to undertake some further listening here.

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There is no intention either to exclude in any way those who hold to the traditional teaching of Scripture now or in the future. Over the last 30 years, the Church of England has wrestled with two other major questions in the development of ministry and ethics: marriage following divorce and the ordained ministry and leadership of women. We do recognise that for some who signed the letter the questions raised by sexuality are more fundamental still. In both these long debates, great care was taken when change was introduced to make provision for those who held views in continuity with the past and to respect individual conscience. If the Church discerns that some further development in polity is needed at this point on human sexuality we will need to take equal care both locally and nationally to honour and respect those who continue to hold the traditional view. We have all benefitted from studying Paul's words on Christians who differ on grounds of conscience in Romans 14 and would commend this text for careful study.

Honesty or silence?

Over my first two years in the Diocese, I (Steven) thought and prayed carefully about how best to fulfil my own responsibilities on these issues. As your letter indicates, there are many strongly held views across the Diocese and many skilled scholars and theologians active in wider debate.

One possibility would have been to remain as silent as possible on these difficult questions, avoid them wherever possible and take refuge in ambiguity. This does not seem to me to be the right course in this diocese at this time.

Instead, along with my episcopal colleagues, I've resolved to attempt to be honest about my own position in the hope that this will best encourage the prayerful, careful and respectful conversation the Church and the diocese need. On the one hand, all of us have spent more than 30 years studying the scriptures, reading the reflections of others, listening to the debate and to individuals in a number of contexts. On the other, we remain conscious of our own fallibility, the amount we still have to learn and the challenge of finding helpful ways forward.

We want to offer our own views therefore but not impose them as we do our best to love one another and be a more Christ like Church together for the sake of God's world.

We look forward to future dialogue and conversation around these issues.

With kind regards

+Steven
+Colin
+Alan
+Andrew