

Conversations around Living in Love and Faith

Introduction

The *Living in Love and Faith* process has sharpened questions about the way we relate to one another as siblings in Christ and members of the same church in the context of deep disagreement. How might people who radically disagree and are heavily invested in the issues nevertheless have measured and helpful conversations? In reality this has not always been possible.

At Bishop Sarah's request, a small number of people with a wide range of perspectives and lived experience have been asked to reflect on these questions. On her behalf I convened conversations with people from six different 'traditions'. Each conversation involved just two people, from the same tradition, so that everyone could speak freely.

It is important to say from the start, as one of the participants pointed out, that 'No church tradition is exempt from getting things wrong in the area of sexual ethics'. This is clear from the history of the Church of England, both historic and recent. It is also clear that we manage to have conversations on other controversial issues, often without the same level of hostility that has sometimes characterised this debate.

Perhaps we can find the language to have a better conversation about these matters, too. Perhaps we can change the narrative so that we relate to one another in a way that is not so polarised, defensive, aggressive or combative. All of the participants expressed this hope at some point during the discussions. Someone asked 'How do we change the narrative? How do we demonstrate that this doesn't have to be the way we conduct the conversation?'

Just as no particular tradition is exempt from getting things wrong in the area of sexual ethics, no tradition has a monopoly on being on the receiving end of aggression in the context of discussions about sexuality and sexual practice. When people challenge others to 'go public' with their sexuality, or there are implied threats to 'out' people on social media, this is aggressive. When the message is 'get out or be outed', this is aggressive. When someone suggests that a person will go to hell because of their sexual practice, this is aggressive. Somebody from one tradition spoke of the pressures from

both 'sides': from one 'do not side with them' from the other 'be out and proud or you're hypocritical'.

In this document I've drawn out several themes from the convened conversations. As well as distinctive differences, there were significant areas of agreement across traditions. People offered similar observations about what is helpful – or unhelpful - in the way that we conduct ourselves when we talk about difficult things.

Several themes emerged, to which I've given headings which are not entirely neat and tidy – there is a crossover of themes in each section – but the headings might be helpful as a 'catch-all' for what was said.

Words

The power of words

For most of us, certain words and phrases will cause offence. They may even contribute to an environment which makes us feel unsafe. It is essential that we are careful with the language that we use, because we can use words to build one another up, or we can use them in a way that is damaging to each other.

We should also recognise that words are 'active'. They change things. They create new understanding, or they solidify misunderstanding. They matter because they have an impact. They create something that wasn't there before.

We need to do the work of understanding how our words land with others; what effect they have. This is especially important when we are trying to build relationships – or remain in relationship - across difference.

This is not cancel culture

And yet, good and honest debate is not well-served by 'policing' one another's words. As someone commented, 'This is not about cancel culture or policing conversations or attempting to constrain free speech'. This is not about what we can or can't say about what we believe. We may **choose** not to say things in certain contexts, out of sensitivity to those around us, but this is more about **how** we say things. We don't want people to

be so afraid of causing offence that the conversation simply shuts down. We actually need clarity about what other people believe and where they stand.

So some suggest that it isn't necessarily helpful to begin with the question 'What is 'triggering' for each of us and how shall we avoid it?' We should also avoid equating 'You disagree with me' with 'You hate me' or 'You are triggering me'. We need to be more nuanced than that about what we're trying to do: of course we are trying our best not to hurt one another – we want to build up, not to tear down – but we also need to be able to say what we think. We should avoid 'weaponizing' offence. There is power in taking offence and misusing it.

Words which bring confusion rather than clarity

Across all traditions there are words and phrases which - instead of helping people to understand one another - tend to muddy the waters, raise the temperature of the conversation or leave people feeling misunderstood, mis-labelled or dissociated from something which is essential to their faith. The problem with these particular words is that we assume we all agree on what they mean – but we don't! People who have very different beliefs and perspectives identify with exactly the same words but understand them entirely differently. Some of these words and phrases are:

Biblical, bible-believing, orthodox, inclusive, progressive, conservative, evangelical, 'the Anglican way', revisionist, affirming.

Some words or phrases are problematic because of their history – the context in which they first arose. The phrase 'same sex attracted' is helpful to some and a phrase with which they can identify. However, other people associate it very closely with 'gay cure therapy', so for them it is understandably problematic language. The way we use words also changes over time. There are generational differences in how we respond to certain terms. The word 'gay' was once offensive but has been reclaimed by some. 'Queer' is used comfortably by some, but has particular, unhelpful, connotations for others.

Some participants in these conversations suggested that because the words we reach for are inaccurate from other people's perspectives, it might be helpful to find more

neutral language to describe the different positions held. For example, the language of Side A, B, X and Y has been used in some contexts to this end.

Alternatively, one participant suggested that perhaps the key is simply to name the difficulty of finding any language to have this conversation that is not problematic. Perhaps we should begin by acknowledging that some people choose to use language which will be problematic to others, then go ahead and have the conversation anyway.

Language which feels personal

There are also phrases which it is particularly difficult for people to hear without feeling a visceral response. These do not come from one perspective or tradition only, but what they have in common is that the effect of making someone feel personally judged, shamed, cancelled, rejected, dismissed, cast out or unwanted. These include phrases such as 'toxic theology', 'homophobic', 'I will not bless sin', being described as 'a small minority', 'lifestyle choices', 'a result of the Fall', 'salvation issue', being accused of 'holding the church back'.

The weaponisation of words, scripture, and people

Some words and phrases have been weaponised in the context of our conversations about sexuality and sexual practice. Some of these are:

Safeguarding, safe, safe space, trauma, traumatised, triggering.

When used to express judgement of another person, or group, or their actions, the effect of these words is either to raise the temperature in the room or to shut down the conversation as people feel vilified or fearful of being judged.

It is not helpful to reference safeguarding, safety and trauma as a shortcut to cancelling another person's contribution to the conversation. And as some who took part in the convened conversations pointed out, when the word 'trauma' is misused it undermines people's genuine experiences of trauma.

It's also possible for people across traditions to weaponize the Bible. If we speak and behave as though our understanding of what the bible says on any given subject is the

only understanding, we are weaponizing scripture. We are shutting down the possibility of any conversation at all.

Similarly we can weaponize entire groups of people, implying that they are completely in agreement on a particular issue. The reality is that within congregations there will almost always be a range of perspectives. It is unhelpful and misleading, therefore, to imply or to claim the opposite. To claim that all people from an evangelical tradition, or a liberal catholic church, or a traditionalist catholic congregation believe the same thing, on this or any other issue, is simply not true.

Safe spaces

Of course we do all need to be aware that when we talk about sex and sexuality in a church context, it is likely that there **will** be people in the room for whom church has not – and perhaps is still not – a safe place; people who have experienced trauma around issues of sex and sexuality in this and other contexts. We need to be highly sensitive to this and vigilant about the wellbeing of those around us.

Yet it was also observed that a safe space does not have to be one in which nobody disagrees with me or challenges my beliefs or assumptions, or says anything which I might find offensive. ‘To be offended is not to be made unsafe.’ And yet, ‘There are ways of expressing ourselves which can make a space more, or less, safe’.

Not just what we say, but how we say it

There was agreement across traditions that it not only matters what we say, but **how** we speak to one another.

‘To disagree with humility, yet putting our cards on the table. It is painful but honest and open.’

‘To use what you consider to be your prophetic voice is different to just being rude’.

‘The manner of the discussion matters. The ability to listen, engage and understand where someone is coming from.’

‘Talking about one another in an honouring way is a biblical thing. This is about how we honour one another in the way that we speak.’

‘It’s about speaking the truth in love’ (though that is a difficult phrase for some, because of that way that it has been misused to justify speaking the truth in a way which takes no account of the recipient).

‘It’s about enabling both to hear the other.’

One person described hearing a measured and clear theological reflection from somebody of a position opposed to their own in the context of a clergy chapter meeting. This person commented: ‘Listening to somebody who has a diametrically opposed view who can set that out in a measured way is profoundly helpful. It makes it possible to understand their position even if we disagree with it. It makes it possible to understand the logic. Even if there is no compromise on the part of that person, we can understand why’.

The same person went on to say ‘By contrast some of the approaches in some meetings have been aggressive and un-Christian. This shuts off all desire and willingness to engage. Some of the debates have been based on anger and prejudice with no logic – just an emotional response.’

Transparency

The connection between transparency of theological position and the desire to ensure welcome and safety for people in our congregations is felt across traditions. Comments made from a similar motivation by holders of different theological perspectives illustrate this. From one tradition: ‘There needs to be a space for parents to work out their theology in community.’ From another tradition: ‘Families moving into an area with a non-binary child need to know (how that will be received)’.

Some think that the answer is straightforward: that websites and any literature produced by the church should carry a clear message communicating ‘the church’s position’. They argue that what appears there ‘Needs not to be coded’. It needs to be clear.

Others say that this is highly problematic, because it is rarely possible to describe one position on these issues which reflects a particular congregation: there is a range of views and understandings, which may or may not accord with those of the church’s

leadership, who may or may not all take exactly the same approach as one another. Even if there is general consensus, articulating it on a website is not always considered to be a helpful approach.

The following comments come from different traditions:

‘Pressure to fly a banner (on a website or elsewhere) does not represent how we respond to people. It signals ‘it’s not safe to come here’. There is an assumption that if we’re explicit nobody will come. And a projection that if someone comes we will try to change them.’

‘This needs to be around teaching, not websites. Websites are not sufficiently nuanced. People need to land in a way that they know what we believe. That is about transparency in how we teach and how we lead. Which all relies on good training for clergy.’

In some traditions it would simply not be the usual pastoral approach to set something out publicly which relates to people’s behaviours. Instead, if there was to be any personal challenge made at all, it would be by way of private pastoral engagement.

From another tradition came the suggestion, ‘What is needed in church spaces is clarity, so that people know the expectations of them. It is possible to express a warm and fulsome welcome with both integrity and clarity, eg: ‘We are an inclusive church where everybody is welcome to belong. Our church tradition leads us to understand that those who are same sex attracted are called to celibacy’.

Where and how we set up conversations

The importance of hospitality and care in the setting up of difficult conversations was highlighted by one person. They emphasised the significance of the space, the way the room is set out (smaller groups, perhaps, café style), the welcome and generous hospitality, the need for somebody with authority to lay down some ground rules for the conversation.

They were asking how we create a physical environment which encourages people to see that alongside their perspective there may be another way of looking at this issue. And it is vital that every voice is heard.

Relationship

Given what was said in these conversations about the difficulties of language, the need for sensitivity, yet the desire to have an honest conversation, it seems that what we are asking of one another is respect, clarity, honesty. As somebody said, “We need charity, grace and relationship’. We fearlessness instead of fear-filled encounters, connection instead of othering.

It sometimes feels as though we have conversations about issues of sexuality as though this is an abstract topic. This doesn’t serve anybody well, not even ourselves! We need a keen level of self-awareness, for as one participant pointed out ‘There is stuff going on for everyone in the room - *our own* stuff’.

Participants from different traditions spoke about the conversation being ‘personal’. Those who identify as LGBTQ+ will experience it this way. So will those who identify as same sex attracted. So will those who believe that their fundamental understanding of themselves, in terms of Christian anthropology, is being up-ended. These groups may not accept that the issue is personal for others – but each feels that it is personal for themselves.

‘There is a lot of ‘othering’’, as someone said. That is, we speak of people as though they are not human beings like us, but a category. Or as though we are unaware that the person sitting next to us in the room has an entirely different life experience, theological understanding, and position on the issue, but is still a person with whom we are in relationship in the family of the church and the body of Christ.

There was a significant degree of desire to learn how to relate well in this conversation, and an understanding that we need to stand together in relationship, not just talk at each other in the context of debate or from a distance or, presumably, from behind the barricades on social media. There was even a suggestion that we will need to relate well regardless of whether, ultimately, we go our separate ways or stay together: ‘If we fracture we need to remain in good relationship’.

So this isn't just about how we speak to one another. It's about how we build good relationships. It's a culture change, not just an attempt to choose better and less helpful words. 'Knowing one another is essential'.

As is giving one another the space to be who we are, and not trying to deny one another agency by mis-labelling, mis-understanding or dictating to other people who and what they can or should be. As one person said, 'You can't tell me where I am and who I am. Or that I cannot be with them.' If we are to treat one another well, we must avoid the use of words to characterise, stereotype, blame, pigeonhole or threaten other people. We will do this best if we are committed to being in relationship with each other.

People from different perspectives speak of feeling pushed out of the church because of their position. 'Part of the dynamic in the conversation at the moment is 'we are here (in the current situation in the church) because YOU are being difficult'. Whereas another perspective is 'We are here because you are changing things'. 'There is a narrative 'if you are not for us, get out'. As though we are redundant. But we're not going anywhere, we belong here.'

People asked the following questions during the conversations which might help us to reflect on the approach we take to building good relationships and to finding creative ways to have dialogue across difference.

'How do we remain respectful whilst disagreeing with each other?'

'How do we make gracious and charitable assumptions about one another?'

'How can we create 'grace-filled spaces'?'

'How do we talk about people and families in a way that is acceptable, when this is about people with established relationships and an established family life?'

'If the person in front of me is Christ to me – even if we deeply disagree on everything – if we believe that Christ is in that person, is in our enemy, how do we behave towards them?'

‘If we took seriously the message ‘Do not be afraid’, how would that change the conversation? If we could have the conversation from a position of un-fear. Not of fear and scarcity.’

‘What is it that fuels people’s passion. Of what are we afraid? Why do we feel threatened? What do we think we might lose? What is winding people up? What is under threat? Why is it threatening even to be having this conversation?’

Summary

Those who took part in this exercise have given permission for their thoughts to be shared anonymously, as above. We are deeply grateful for the gift of their time, honesty, openness and wisdom.

This paper does not reach definitive conclusions or even a set of agreed questions which, if resolved, would lead to answers on which everyone could agree. Rather, it sets out a range of perspectives and represents a continued willingness to engage in conversation. It is offered in that spirit, in the hope that it might be useful as conversations around Living in Love and Faith continue.

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May 2025