

25 June 2015

Dear Friends and Colleagues

BBC Radio Oxford contacted me on Friday morning about a “Reform” press release calling for my resignation. I have always been really careful not to say anything in public about the ministry of any colleague in Bucks because it would be disloyal to them. I hadn’t had any contact with those behind this press release, and don’t know what they may or may not have been saying about me. However, as a matter of shared accountability, I now need to clarify some of the issues they have raised for all those with whom I share ministry in Buckinghamshire.

Over the past five years many hundreds of people have sent me messages of one sort or another about sexuality. The great majority have, to my surprise, been generally supportive of a more inclusive approach. However for others same-sex marriage has become a first order issue. The great social upheaval this represents, along with the articulation of my own personal viewpoint, is causing them profound distress and anger.

Whilst the Church formally discerns good ways ahead many clergy are not particularly angry, but feel they need safe space to discern how best to work pastorally in a way that’s fully inclusive and good news within the communities we serve. I acknowledge that many colleagues find real difficulty in using the word “marriage” for gay people’s relationships, whilst recognising that the law and broader society now speak in this way. One of the key messages I have been communicating in the media is that local Churches usually welcome all people as Christ did, regardless of gender or sexual orientation. Any stereotype that denies this needs to be challenged.

A growing number of Christians, including many Evangelicals, now fully affirm present realities about same-sex marriage. At the same time, a sizeable minority of our own LGBT clergy and lay people feel increasingly unsafe, and that the Church has rejected them. Many of these contact me, sometimes in great distress and pain, and have come to see me as a safe bishop with whom to talk through their stories. It is a great joy to minister reconciliation to people who had lost all hope that they could be part of the Church at all. Meanwhile most of the people we serve, especially young people, are baffled as to why this is an issue for us.

In this context how any particular bishop can be a focus of unity is quite a complicated thing. True Unity embraces all. Everyone wants to hear something different from us. The only way forward, in these circumstances, is for each to be convinced in their own mind and speak with integrity whilst not judging others. All are equally loved and prayed for here, whatever their perspective.

One person has understandably asked why I was in Nottingham at Jeremy Pemberton’s Employment Tribunal last week. Firstly, I was called as an expert witness on the way faith, doctrine and law relate to one another in Church, a subject on which I once spent 8 years writing a doctoral thesis. Secondly, the Pemberton case clearly relates to the area of my recent book, and an opportunity to see various arguments that are advanced about it analysed and cross-examined has been very valuable in developing my own thinking. Thirdly, I was called as someone from within the Church who has experienced the implementation of Common Tenure, and thus has a long-standing interest in and involvement with clergy HR. The case itself turned on the way that clergy with PTO are treated from an HR point of view. Judgment will be given late autumn, likely to be appealed either way because this case raises some important points of principle.

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I am baffled by any suggestion that I am somehow living outside the way of life laid down in Canon B30. I have been happily married for over 30 years and am entirely compliant. The soundbite that seems to have energised some people was drawing attention to the shortcomings of canon B30 as a definition, not criticising its substance in any way. I don't, of course, deny marriage is between a man and a woman. I merely wish to see access to it expanded. I am also puzzled by any suggestion it is not open to me or other clergy to argue for change. During over 40 years, archbishops, bishops, priests and deacons have argued vigorously for change to the canons forbidding women's ordination and there is a clear synodical process for such decisions.

I do not, in fact, advocate any change to canon B30. For the Employment Tribunal the essence of the alleged discrimination was that it had been applied differently to Canon Pemberton as a married gay man to the way it would have been applied to him as a divorcee. I was arguing that the canon should be applied equally and consistently to gay and straight people. Canons are usually the last thing to change as the Church's thinking has evolved. We have managed with divorcees since 1978 by interpreting C30 as historically descriptive rather than prescriptive.

The doctrinal aspect of marriage turns for me on the statement of the Doctrine Commission, that "Marriage is an institution of the natural order which is taken into and sanctified by the Christian Church." It follows from this foundational concept that the Church's starting point for any definition of marriage is the natural order. Christians, including Evangelicals, hold a wide range of different opinions about same-sex marriage because some of them see being gay as against nature, and others as a variant within the order of nature.

In this present instance the right of all clergy to hold sincere views about sexuality is quite specifically articulated in the House of Bishops statement on the subject. It is very important that the current round of shared conversations encompasses all viewpoints, and I hope that in the 'space' created we all have time to think and pray around the matter and meanwhile continue to work together within our differences.

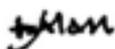
The question of how we do this is wholly dependent upon the atmosphere we create for conversation. We need to live with different perspectives without judging one another. We did this as Bishop's staff whilst Bishop John was still with us, and in a spirit of openness and honesty put together our own principles which emerged from our conversation. We are united about them, and they are clear. They may be found at <http://www.oxford.anglican.org/bishop-john-facilitated-conversations/>

The passage I return to again and again in all this is Romans 13-14, with its clear mandates about how we handle civil authority, and its call to us to articulate and live out our convictions clearly, but with an eye to the benefit of all, remembering at all times whose Lord we are.

If these issues are affecting anyone's ministry at the present time then please feel free to approach Archdeacon Karen, Bishop Colin or myself for a confidential conversation.

With love and prayers,

as ever



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