

This Briefing Paper seeks to offer a short summary of the key points made in the Bishop of Birkenhead's Dissenting Statement within the Pilling Report. It does so by answering a number of questions that are likely to be raised by his statement and offering the statement's response to them.

Why was a dissenting statement necessary? Is it not possible for traditionalists to agree with the main Report?

The dissenting statement, issued with "much regret" (para 415), believes the Report does not do justice to the clear witness of Scripture and Christian tradition, will undermine the discipleship and pastoral care of those faithful to that witness and, as Synod warned in 2007, increase division within the Church of England and the Communion. Issuing a dissenting statement also makes clear that the differences in the church are deep and real and encourages the bishops not to ignore these but to "bear the pain of the Church in our own life together, and continue to seek and trust God for his better way" (paras 415-417).

But doesn't the Report uphold traditional teaching?

The Report does indeed state that it upholds traditional teaching but the dissenting statement argues in some detail that in reality it does not do this. Despite its claims, the Report fails to set out and commend that teaching (paras 432-448) and undermines confidence in the church's teaching by arguing that the current debate about sexuality is inconclusive. The Report therefore draws the conclusion that we simply do not know what the proper Christian approach to sexuality should be (paras 449-471), and proposes public services for same-sex relationships in a way that is inconsistent with that teaching (paras 472-482).

So does the dissenting statement claim that the Report is inconsistent?

The dissenting statement asks what, if it followed the Report, the Church of England would recommend as a Christian response to someone experiencing same-sex attraction or say about the changes in society and the law (para 433). It claims (para 434) that there are three possible answers in the Report. (1) The claim to abide by the church's official teaching would imply everyone should remain single and abstinent unless and until they find themselves able to marry someone of the opposite sex. However, (2) it is also stated in the Report that while same-sex sexual relationships which do not seek to embody faithfulness, exclusivity and life-long commitment cannot be right, we have to "learn from what previous generations of the faithful have understood the Holy Spirit to be saying to the Churches, wait for the Spirit's guidance in our own generation, and commit ourselves to finding ways for the Church to continue to listen for his voice" (para 312) Finally, (3) the proposal to allow public services for same-sex partners, including potentially those who are married, suggests that entering a sexual relationship in the form of civil partnership or possibly marriage may receive the church's blessing.

Does the dissenting statement only object to the recommendation about public services or is it rejecting all the Report's recommendations?

The dissenting statement is clear that “there is much in the Report’s analysis and recommendations with which I agree and hope the Church will accept” (para 418). In particular, it highlights recommendations 5-7 and the recognition that we must move beyond the simple division of homosexual and heterosexual (paras 415-419). However, the difficulty is not only with recommendation 16, but with the Report’s entire argument that a facilitated conversation about sexuality is needed because the arguments on both sides in the current date are inconclusive and we cannot be sure what Scripture teaches about this issue. The Report’s effective undermining of the teaching it claims to uphold will “cause confusion to many faithful Anglicans, particularly those who experience same-sex attraction” (para 435).

But don’t we have to accept the Church lacks an agreed mind about sexual ethics?

The dissenting statement points out that the Church of England and the Anglican Communion of which it is part *has* expressed its mind on sexual ethics. Indeed, in 2007 the General Synod warned against the Church of England being perceived as “qualifying its commitment to the entirety of the relevant Lambeth Conference Resolutions”. The author of the dissenting statement shows that the Report qualifies that commitment and believes that instead the bishops should reaffirm it, arguing that the fact that there are some within the Church who reject or question the church’s teaching should not be made the basis and framework for conversations.

So does the dissenting statement reject conversations and have a problem with an open debate about sexuality?

The dissenting statement agrees that facilitated discussions about sexuality are needed, but it is concerned about the Report establishing them on the false premise that “we cannot be sure what the Church should believe, teach and practice in the area of sexuality” (para 483) It warns that shaping the discussions by the Report’s content is likely to be highly damaging, perhaps impossible. Continuing discussion needs to have a clear reference to what the Bible teaches about sexuality and to place this at the centre of any evaluation of tradition, reason and experience in the life of the Church. It states that those who uphold biblically based traditional teaching will not be encouraged to engage in discussion if it appears the Church of England has “already effectively decided to walk away from this teaching” (paras 483-485).

Isn’t the dissenting statement trying to impose its particular reading of Scripture on the rest of the Church rather than recognising there are orthodox Bible-believing Christians who take a different view and have no problem with this Report?

The dissenting statement rejects this accusation, arguing that its approach, as set out in the statement and Appendix 3, represents the univocal and until recently unquestioned witness of the Church and does “most justice to the joint witness of Scripture, Tradition and reason in relation to matters of sexuality” (para 462). It points out, with examples, that while clearly some have argued that Scripture can be read so as to sanction sexual same-sex relationships, “the traditional reading is widely acknowledged as valid even amongst scholars and theologians who reject it” (para 467). In claiming that Scripture is not clear, the Report not only ignores this scholarly consensus but rejects

the mind of the Anglican Communion and risks imposing its indeterminate reading of Scripture as the basis for the conversations it recommends.

What is wrong with clergy offering services, as long as nobody is compelled to do so?

Anglicans believe that liturgy expresses doctrine. The dissenting statement therefore argues that this recommendation and the rationale behind it in paras 372-399 is incompatible with the claim to uphold the church's teaching and contradicts the mind of the Communion. It sets out a number of reasons (paras 472-482). These include that the church must "be confident that the pattern of relationship it is affirming is in accordance with God's will" (para 476) which, if the Church's teaching is to be upheld, requires the relationship to be celibate. As it stands the recommendation would give liturgical recognition to same-sex marriages and, by leaving the matter to parish clergy and PCCs, risks liturgical anarchy. This will undermine the Church's witness to our culture and amount to blessing relationships when Scripture and the church urge people to repent of them. It will also undermine those Christians with same-sex attraction who seek to be faithful to Scripture and church teaching.

What is the dissenting statement's vision for human flourishing?

It offers what it believes to be the authentic Christian vision for human flourishing shared not only with Christians down through the centuries but across the world and across the major Christian denominations. This is set out clearly in both the dissenting statement (especially paragraphs 424-431 and 486-489) and in Appendix 3, and summed up at the end of the dissenting statement (para 481).

Isn't the dissenting statement's vision and approach one of missional suicide?

The dissenting statement concludes by acknowledging that its vision would lead to criticism both inside and outside the church, and that "we would have to learn to be confident in holding beliefs that many in our society did not share or even understand" (para 489). It argues, however, that adopting the Report would, "by leading the Church into the kind of cultural captivity which much of the prophetic writings warn against, weaken our commitment to God's mission" (para 416). It believes that if we are to be faithful to God's revelation in our mission, we need to be both welcoming to all *and* clear that following Christ means limiting sexual intercourse to marriage between husband and wife. This will mean "learning in our own generation what it is to carry the cross" as "part of our loving obedient response to God's love for us. Jesus loved us to the end and, as he loved us, he calls us to love one another" (para 489).