

Ed Shaw is pastor of Emmanuel City Centre (part of a Bishop's Mission Order in the Diocese of Bristol) and on the editorial team at www.livingout.org (a website where Christians share their experience of same-sex attraction). He attended the first regional Shared Conversations as a delegate from Bristol. On his return we asked him the following questions:

What were the shared conversations like?

In three words: frustrating, depressing, exhausting! Let me explain:

Frustrating. We were really never given clarity as to what exactly we were discussing and so never had the opportunity for a really fruitful discussion as to why we might disagree. The main question we were posed ("Given the significant changes in our culture in relation to human sexuality how should the church respond?") was never really answered or even properly explored. This created an increasingly frustrating atmosphere for all involved – especially those who hold strong views on either "side". We wanted to graciously engage with each other's positions on particular issues, understand the bigger issues, and personal stories behind them, but were constantly denied that opportunity by both the programme and the way the conversations were managed. As a result the best conversations over the few days (and there were some very precious ones) had to happen in stolen moments in a very packed programme.

Depressing. It was distressing to hear of the crass pastoral care given to same-sex attracted clergy (and others) by bishops in the past. It was equally upsetting to be told of the hypocrisy of those (on all "sides") who've said one thing in private and another in public – encouraging on a one-to-one basis what they have been afraid to support in public. I wish I could say that all these stories were from the distant past – some were very new and raw. We have got so much wrong in the past and it was depressing to be reminded of the painful damage this has caused precious people we should have loved better.

Exhausting. The personal and painful subject matter promised it would be tiring but the packed nature of the programme (a 7am start and 10pm finish on the main full day) guaranteed this. I left physically, mentally and spiritually exhausted.

Why should we be going to the shared conversations?

In the light of the above - not for a fun and relaxing few days away! Nor to help the Church of England make its mind up on this issue – we kept being reminded that we were not part of a formal decision-making process and so no particular outcomes were needed.

So what is the point? That is the question that kept going through my mind then and since – especially as I fear the conversations will have unintended consequences in increasing the appetite and expectation for a radical change in the church's official teaching.

It may have been designed as something of a holding operation pending the election of a new General Synod and whilst the bishops discover how to give effective leadership in this area but it may yet build up a head of steam that takes us all in a direction that the House of Bishops might not welcome. I can understand – as a result – why many have wisely decided to stay away.

But aside from the politics I was personally helped – as I always have been – by another opportunity to hear of the experiences and views of those who I am in sharp disagreement with on this "issue".

As frustrating, depressing and exhausting as the three days were I treasure the few chances I had to hear the stories, and encounter the suffering, of other same-sex attracted people who have made very different decisions to me. Whatever the final effects of these conversations (and only history will be able to list them) I appreciated a context in which those helpful one-to-one conversations just about managed to take place.

How could the shared conversations be improved?

If I could I would redesign much of the process! I would include a proper amount of time to focus on the scriptures and some plenary sessions hearing the stories/ perspectives of people who self-identify as LGBT/ SSA (especially the B & T categories). I'd also remove the seemingly heavy steer given to the conversations by including the Church of Scotland document in the resources booklet and provide a better range of other more accessible resources instead. I'd also be working on a more practical way of ensuring the voice of the wider Anglican Communion is better heard (there were none of the promised international representatives flown in for our conversations).

But even some fine-tuning on the current process would do some good. There needs to be less of an emphasis on small groups having to feed-back a sound-bite united summary of their discussions – this often made us feel pressured into agreement around meaningless clichés rather than allowing meaningful disagreement. There should also be more encouragement for all to ask and answer the question “Why?” so that greater understanding of different perspectives can be arrived at. Without this permission people like me felt unreasonably divisive when we did try to gently point out the more fundamental disagreements that exist behind the presenting issue of human sexuality; and that is when it often stopped feeling like a “safe space” for me.

What advice would you give to others going to the shared conversations?

It is not for the faint-hearted and all the feedback I've heard so far suggests that it is those holding to the bible's traditional teaching that come back feeling most battered and bruised. An apparently representative process leaves people like me feeling part of a small minority – perhaps that is accurate but whatever it is very painful. Expect it to cost you a huge amount of energy as well as time. Take a break after. Make sure family and friends are around to support you. If you are same-sex attracted yourself expect the experience to be especially frustrating, depressing and exhausting – with the benefit of hindsight I massively underestimated the effect it would have on me. But do still hold onto the truth that, despite appearances, our Father God *is* control and so it is *always* worth staying loyal to him, whatever the cost may be.