

The invitation to join the shared conversations on issues in human sexuality came as something of a surprise. After months of not knowing what was going to be discussed, the paperwork and booklets came through. With Easter and an APCM ahead, the reading was postponed until nearer the time and when the time came, the dense theological content was certainly not accessible for the average lay person. Looking at the plan for the three days, I couldn't work out how the reading material would intersect with the discussion topics and I was none the wiser on my return home.

The environment in which the conversations took place was beautiful. The facilitators were clearly very skilled professionals and the chaplain a very calming presence. As time went on it became clear that some of the delegations carried more than the recommended two LGBTI representatives and that those of us with an orthodox view on issues in human sexuality were very much in the minority.

The conversations were not meant to answer but to address the question 'In view of changes in society with regard to issues in human sexuality, how should the church respond?' During one of these sessions we were invited to review the essays written on the subject of human sexuality and the church circulated in advance. This meant that the only theological discussion centred on the essays rather than the core issues. The rest of the sessions were largely devoted to hearing stories and thinking of what the future might be. We were therefore left to think about 'how the church should respond?' without any clarity about what we were responding to and very little theological groundwork with which to contemplate what that response might be. I heard it said 'I've been here for three days and I don't know what we are talking about'.

I had thought that these conversations were an attempt to establish whether an amicable agreement or divorce could be reached in the Church of England over the issue of same-sex marriage. The absence of opportunities to clarify whether we were discussing same-sex marriage meant that, as people shared their stories, it was unclear whether they were advocating a church that not only accepted same-sex marriage or simply 'anything goes'.

Where 'pastoral accommodation' might have previously been the goal, I think that the goal should now be to establish whether the acceptance of same-sex marriage into any form of pastoral accommodation is simply a pre-cursor to 'anything goes'. I know that there are many who believe that same-sex marriage should be accepted by the Church of England and they see that life-long fidelity and no sex before marriage are key ingredients to its health. I also know of others for whom same-sex marriage does not carry the same weight and responsibility. The greatest mistake of those with an orthodox position could be to assume that those who agree with same-sex marriage being accepted in the Church of England are of one mind on issues in human sexuality.

The experience of 'sharing our story in relation to sexual identity' seemed to uncover quite a lot of confidence amongst the LGBTI representatives. Talking to them it is clear that the church's journey on this issue has caused huge pain. On reflection the Church of England has transitioned from being privately permissive but publicly conservative on the issue of clergy being involved in same-sex relationships to being privately conservative and publicly more open to the idea. The net effect is that clergy who were ordained 'against the rules' in the past at the discretion of their bishop, now find themselves feeling rather uncomfortable, particularly as they hear stories of DDOs stopping the discernment process because of sexual orientation and practice. It also became clear that they have been hurt by homophobia in the church and understandably so.

In an environment in which 'story' was the primary value, the LGBTI narrative clearly began to take the ascendancy and it became increasingly unsafe to hold an orthodox view on issues in human sexuality. I found myself withdrawing as the sessions progressed, contemplating life outside the Church of England. I have no desire to leave but I cannot fathom how this will end without acrimony unless the orthodox choose to leave graciously.

But the same scriptures which hold authority on issues in sexuality also instruct me to 'make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace'. Weeks later I find myself disappointed that we were

asked to respond to the question 'how should the church respond?' without any basic theology, disappointed with how some of the bishops assembled their delegations and praying that in the midst of this mess I make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Deep within I know that God is at work, as He is always is. Somehow I think He is using this to sharpen the church's witness to His love, so that we know and present a gospel of forgiveness and transformation, of invitation and challenge. Therein we will find ourselves loving sinners and calling people to holiness.