

The Shared Conversations have been established within a very clear and prepared framework. In advance of the three days of conversation participants receive documentation that establishes the ground rules and gives some background reading. The aim of the conversation is simply to have a conversation in a way that is facilitated and conducted so as to be as careful and helpful as possible. It is communicated clearly that there is no other aim or agenda than this and these conversations are not heading towards a conclusion or addressing a particular agenda. Every single group discussion session is set up to address a particular question and requires a facilitator to ensure that these conversations remain within this framework.

I attended the East Midlands conversation involving Leicester, Lincoln, Peterborough, Southwell, and Derby Dioceses. I am glad that I did as I learned much and now better understand different issues and others' experiences. I am also glad that I did because there were two empty chairs representing people from other Dioceses who hold the orthodox view and yet felt unable to attend. I am now more convinced that it is important for evangelicals to attend having seen the effect of these absences in weakening the orthodox representation and them being viewed poorly by others who hold different views and who are then free to draw their own conclusions about the reason for these absences. I am extremely grateful for the attendance of orthodox brothers and sisters who greatly strengthened me.

There were two main areas of reflection for me following these conversations. Firstly fear. There is so much fear around this issue on all sides because it is so painful for many people. We spent a very frustrating hour trying to agree what confidentiality meant in order to make sure everyone felt that our meeting was as safe a place as possible – it was clear that people from different positions on this issue still did not feel safe. Fear is never a good thing but I think it was helpful to acknowledge it, to understand how others experience it and, through conversation, to see some of those fears reduced through greater understanding. The experience of meeting and talking in this way did show that care, generosity and humility can enable people from different positions to talk and listen and break down prejudices and learn from each other.

However the second area is less positive. I returned with great concern that the majority of the participants had lost any clear understanding of the Bible as authoritative in their lives. The approaches were shocking to me, and, as a result, my approach was shocking to them. This confirmed that we are already two churches, one which sees the Bible as a helpful collection of writings from which to draw inspiration but which can be used to say whatever we want it to, or simply be ignored. The other seeks to submit to Scripture as we interpret it and apply it to our lives and trust in its goodness as God's word to us, even when it is painful and challenging. The result of this is that there were many moments of incredulity expressed by people from different positions as they realised others in the room held a belief so far from their own.

I will share one particularly difficult example of this. In a facilitated session one person said that the orthodox position was responsible for their friends' suicide. While I showed concern for their loss, and acknowledged the hurt caused by prejudice and judgemental attitudes within churches, I rejected the direct link between holding an orthodox understanding of sexual relationships and their friends' decision to end their life. I then shared how I felt that the celebration of same-sex relationships was deeply damaging to society through the confusion it brings to issues of identity, relationships, gender, sin, etc. and how it undermines the position of heterosexual marriage which is

God's intended pattern for sexual relationships. Following this facilitated discussion the facilitator approached me privately to say that a complaint had been made against me for expressing the above views. The facilitator explained that they had answered the complaint by saying that they didn't think I had expressed that view and didn't believe I held it. When I confirmed that I did they were surprised as they didn't think anyone would hold such views and then suggested that what I had shared was unhelpful. I suggested this was exactly the purpose of these conversations, to share our views freely, and stand by my views.

For me this is an example of a fundamental weakness and danger in all of this. The questions set for each discussion session are carefully phrased to encourage us to share our personal opinion on an issue without giving much opportunity to critique the opposing view. This left us with the need to set up optional extra sessions to have freedom to express the full extent of opposing views. There is a danger that people conclude, from these conversations, that it is possible to square the circle of opposing views because of the genuinely positive way in which most people engaged in them- it isn't possible and these conversations reveal that there is no middle ground for people. There is also a danger that, because of the structure of the questions, people conclude the differences are not as great as they are and that most people would support some movement in the church's doctrine and practice. I do not believe that this danger is a reason not to participate, instead it shows how important it is that the orthodox view is expressed, and that it is expressed fully and clearly, in love and humility. People should prepare how they will make this contribution because in the environment established it can feel difficult to express and, at times, that it is unwelcome.

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