

## **SHOULD WE AGREE TO DISAGREE ON SEXUALITY?**

The claim is sometimes made in relation to the Church's response to same-sex relationships that we should 'agree to disagree'. Well-intentioned Christians genuinely reach different conclusions regarding the interpretation of Scripture in many other areas, and we accept those differences of opinion as legitimate, acknowledging the integrity of people on both sides. Is this an approach which we should adopt with respect to sexuality too?

Of course, people do have different points of view on this issue, not least in a context in which there is enormous cultural and emotional pressure to shift to a more accepting view of sex of same-sex relationships. And we can learn a huge amount from listening to and engaging with different views from our own, especially by hearing the personal stories of same-sex attracted and gay people, so we can continue to improve our pastoral practice (although, of course, SSA/gay people themselves have different views on this issue).

As well as listening to and learning from one another, we can also 'agree to disagree' in the sense that everyone is entitled to their opinion. As a Church, we teach and practice infant baptism. But there are plenty of Anglicans who believe in 'believer's baptism'. We do not think that this makes them unfaithful Christians, even if we might think they are wrong! In one sense, as a Church, we agree to disagree with them.

So, yes to listening and learning, and yes to agreeing to disagree with an opinion. But it does not follow from this that we should agree to disagree on official Church teaching, pastoral and liturgical practice, and ministerial discipline. To return to the example of our 'Anglican Baptists', we can accept them as faithful Christians and agree to disagree with their views. But if they seek rebaptism, clergy will politely refuse (and probably take the opportunity to explain to them the Church's teaching on baptism). In our teaching and pastoral practice, we uphold the faith we profess in one baptism, and we refrain from acts which would undermine it. The Church stands in a particular tradition, even if some of its faithful members disagree with that tradition.

As with baptism, so with marriage. We must listen to and learn from one another. That may even lead us to agree to disagree in the sense that we recognise that those with whom we disagree are godly people who have come to their conclusions in good faith. But all of that is quite different from settling the question of whether as a Church we should marry same-sex couples, publicly celebrate same-sex unions, or ordain those in sexual relationships other than marriage between a man and a woman. We can disagree together about what we should do but as a Church we either do something or we do not.

A final point to make is that in this matter we are not starting from a position of neutrality. The Church has a clear, well-established practice in this area. That practice is authorised by Scripture, theologically rooted, shared with the Church across time and denominations, and supported by the Anglican Communion. The fact some disagree and wish it to change is not sufficient basis to change it. Any change needs to be defended theologically and demonstrated to be authorised by (or at least consonant with) Scripture and one which will not damage the unity and mission of the body of Christ.