

The Shared Conversations

A personal reflection

With some sense of trepidation and apprehension I made my way to Woolacombe to participate in the much debated first round of the Shared Conversations as one of the representatives for the Bath and Wells Diocese. The other Dioceses sending up to 10 people each were Gloucester, Bristol, Exeter and Truro.

I had read the fairly academic resource booklet that included the kind of essays I had often engaged with on online forums, setting out the biblical view against same sex relationships and the theological view in favour, and I was ready to do battle with those who did not share my theology. As I am same sex married I also felt more than a little defensive and somewhat scared of being confronted with the kind of people I have spent the last 10 years debating with.... in the same hotel for three days, no escape... it was daunting! Knowing the passion behind these conversations and how heated, even insulting these debates can get, I shared the fears of many that the Shared Conversations were not really safe for LGBT people and I was nervous about what facilitation, however well meant, could actually do to make us feel safe. Participants are drawn according to a formula that includes 2 LGBT representatives per Diocese and the thought that there could potentially be only 10 people personally affected by the question of same sex equality in a room full of 50 people made me feel uncomfortably nervous.

I assumed that I would be part of a process that included, on both sides, the same kind of people I have been passionately engaged with online for the last 10 years and I hoped that I might understand some of the arguments of those on the other side better, although I couldn't really see how that might be possible, considering that I must have engaged with every single argument under the sun on so many occasions.

What became clear in the course of the 3 days was that together, we were a microcosm of the Church of England. There were LGBT people, not enough young people (not all Dioceses met their targets) and people who had been influenced by LGBT people in their close families. Far from being "for" or "against" same sex relationships, the range of views was far more nuanced, encompassing "being gay is sinful", "gay people can be healed", "being gay and celibate is ok", "being gay and partnered is ok as long as it's not within church leadership", "being gay and partnered is ok as long as it's not called marriage", "being gay, married and in church leadership is ok". Representation ranged from passionately affirming straight people to gay people holding to traditional theology. It included those who had been deeply involved in these debates for years and those who only realised very recently that the church needed to discuss homosexuality. Many had never engaged with this topic in their churches and consequently found the resources highly complex and their "yes" or "no" approach too narrowly focused. Few felt qualified to assess and engage with the biblical and theological arguments made by Ian Paul on the one hand and Loveday Alexander on the other.

That did not matter as much as it could have because deep biblical debate was explicitly not the purpose of the Conversations, although there were plenty of opportunities for those who wanted to wrestle with Scripture with others who did not share their views to do so in voluntary groups in the evening and, of course, in the bar where the most fruitful personal conversations happened in an atmosphere of mutual respect, trust, curiosity and genuine searching.

Rather than repeat the familiar way of discussing homosexuality, the Conversations focused on exploring how participants felt about the status quo in the church, the reasons people had for holding their views, for trying to discover the "issues behind the issue" and on the possibility of finding our way to some form of good disagreement.

The highly professional facilitation team was outstanding and guided us expertly through a very intense and very deep process that was often profoundly challenging for many of us. A Chaplain was available at all times. Everyone was heard, no-one dominated the conversations taking place in many ever changing small groups, no specific views were being hammered home, no-one imposed their views on others and everyone I met tried very hard to be as honest as they could be while taking great care to word their views so that they were not experienced as dismissive or judgemental. There was a real sense of trying not to offend while remaining true to oneself. Although I often felt profoundly challenged I never felt unsafe, and as my awareness of the others as genuinely loving and Christian people grew, I found myself in ever more intimate and emotional conversations with the kind of people I had previously only ever sparred with online.

The Shared Conversations are different from our online debates where people can often sound angry, self-assured and self-righteous. At the Conversations I met real people, very warm-hearted people who just could not reconcile what they read in Scripture with what I was saying about myself and my faith. There was no anger, no self-righteousness, just a deep and almost sad conviction that it may not be possible to read Scripture in another way.

This was the first of the series of Conversations and the process was therefore not perfect. I won't go into detail here because we fed back a number of suggestions to the facilitators and it could well be that there will be changes in future Conversations.

Three days is barely enough to talk about everything surrounding the complex issues of human sexuality and the church, and there were many of us who wished that this or the other topic had been included or discussed at greater depth. I suspect that if someone had made a list of those topics, we would have ended up with enough material for at least another week. The programme was very full and intense and altogether mentally and emotionally draining, so much so that after the last group task had been introduced and extremely well explained, twice, those of us sitting around my table turned to each other saying ... "so what are supposed to do"?

It was inevitable that the process left us with more questions than it had answered. Come to think of it, I'm not even sure that it answered anything specific at all.

While rarely acrimonious, it was most definitely not all sweetness and light although there were light moments, there was laughter, increasing trust and a sense of friendship even with those we disagree with passionately. There was a real sense of deep searching honesty, of grappling, of a commitment to hearing what we needed to hear, saying what we needed to say. Of gentleness with each other, of compassion and an awareness of the power our words have. In this atmosphere in which we became deeply aware of each other, I heard people from all sides say words like: "I will not use my pain as a weapon". "I will not use Scripture as a weapon". "I will not throw stones". I increasingly felt that we are all on this journey together, with each other, not against each other. Many commented what a powerful symbol the two shared Communion Services had been.

This was not a place for easy answers and clear solutions. At the end of it all, a few of us left dispirited because they felt that it looked unlikely that the church would ever change enough. Others left in great sadness because they said they had realised for the first time that change was inevitable. I know of two who said they had changed their opinion and were now supporting lgbt equality, and one who felt they would have to leave the church if it ever became affirming. I think all of us left deeply thoughtful.

The majority appeared to be committed to continuing to listen and there was a strong sense of people wanting to take individual ownership of the process and to take it into their various spaces – churches, lobby groups, friendship groups, PCCs etc.

There was also a tremendous sense of energy and a commitment from the groups from the individual Dioceses wanting to make sure that the conversations did not stop here but that the bishops might be encouraged to support a rolling out of some form of conversations about human sexuality in their Dioceses and into the parishes, as it had become increasingly clear that far too few have even begun to talk about sexuality.

I personally left exhausted but energised, full of hope for the church and for the conversations.

The greatest gift I received was from someone as diametrically opposed to my views as possible, who listened to me with genuine empathy and who thereby allowed me to drop my defences and to really hear what he was saying. I had been able to walk over to him after he had tearfully affirmed his convictions, hug him and be hugged back, cry together, pray together; both of us truly listening to each other and both desperately wishing things could be different.

Many of us wanted to say to those of you planning to participate in one of the next Conversations – do not be afraid. It will not be easy, it will be draining, it will be emotionally and intellectually challenging, but it will be safe and it will be worth every minute, whatever conclusions you will find yourself reaching.

What I would like to say to the Bishops is - if what I have experienced is a genuine representation of the church, we have nothing to fear from this debate.

I'm hoping, maybe against hope, that we can break out of this bubble where we see the church in black and white and where we are terrified of a split if there is any change. What I saw is much more nuanced, much less strident. If that becomes the tenor of all the Conversations, if there is a pattern, and if the facilitators and the rest of us feed this back... then maybe everyone can be less fearful.

We need to talk more, much more. There were people who were open-mouthed when they heard what the situation for many gay people in the church is like. They had simply not had any idea. There were others who said their churches were quietly affirming and that they now realised they had to make more of an effort to make that more widely known. "All are welcome" is not enough. The welcome has to be made more explicit. Some people from conservative churches I spoke to thought they had to offer better pastoral support to their LGBTI people.

We are not just "pro" or "anti" churches. This is not a battle for most people but something where we hold different views. How important those differences are remains to be seen.

If these conversations can highlight that, then much of the threat of schism will be less worrying because it simply is not going to happen to the extent people fear.

To achieve a broader and more peaceful good disagreement we need to hear more people, talk to the non-campaigning people in our churches who do not meet an out gay person from one year to the next, and who may have surprising contributions to make to this conversation.

There is no pre-determined outcome. There is no guarantee that the gentleness and the energy released during those three days in Woolacombe will be repeated in other Shared Conversations or that it can be a spark for changing the way the whole church engages with the topic of human sexuality.

But there is hope. Plenty of hope.

Erika Baker