

To: The Archbishop of Canterbury;
The Archbishop of York;
The Archbishop-Designate of York

27 January 2020

Dear Archbishops Justin & Sentamu, Archbishop-Designate Stephen,

House of Bishops' Statement on Opposite-Sex Civil Partnerships

We write to you as Officers of the General Synod to express our dismay at the publication of the House of Bishops' Statement on Opposite-Sex Civil Partnerships. We write not to debate its theological content, to which as partnered gay men we would bring our lived experience and a robust critique. Instead we feel it necessary, with a responsibility to speak on behalf of the clergy of the Convocations, to raise some concerns with you and on this occasion to make those concerns public. Specifically:

- **We are concerned for the integrity of the *Living in Love and Faith* process.** While some will argue that the House's Statement last week is but an extension of its current position on Civil Partnerships, the timing of this statement is a serious failure of the House and its staff to commit to proper process, and a notable failure to demonstrate "a radical new Christian inclusion etc etc", which has to be about process as much as it is about content. We would note that since February 2017, when the House of Clergy defeated the motion of the Bishops after the Shared Conversations, most people in the Church of England have exercised a degree of restraint in the field of human sexuality. Repeatedly, when bishops have addressed the concerns and anxieties of progressives and conservatives, we have agreed to the request to "wait for the publication of LLF". We ourselves have both urged this approach on more impatient colleagues too as this was, we were repeatedly told, to be a new step in the life of the Church. Regrettably, and not for the first time, such self-restraint has not been seen in the House. We can only imagine what those closer to the process than we are might think of this intervention by the House, after so much costly work. It feels like a significant betrayal.
- **We are concerned about the ability of the House of Bishops to own and lead *Living in Love and Faith* beyond its publication.** We have expressed to you privately our desire that the House will be given the necessary expertise and training to lead the Church in the process that will emerge from the publication of LLF. We are yet to see or hear of any clear commitment of the House to this. As things stand, therefore, and in the light of this most recent Statement and the readiness of some bishops to be seen to distance themselves from it despite having to own it as policy, we cannot be yet confident that the House has, as a body, the skills, staff resource, coherence or temperament to lead the work that LLF envisages. We note that the College of Bishops has been engaging with the final documents of LLF together. It does not bode well that, knowing the content of the forthcoming material, last week's Statement could be issued without any apparent awareness of any learning to date. We seek to be assured by you that urgent, serious consideration be given to the LLF roll-out, and we will both publicly and privately challenge you to do so. Furthermore, we suggest that, as a matter of course, the House will engage at a wider level within the Church before making future Statements. We would suggest that there is much to be gained by the House from having some critical friends who are not part of it, to challenge and critique possible decisions before they are made public. We note that the House found this helpful in the context of the ministry of women in the episcopate and that none of the LGBT+ bishops in the House feel able to speak both publicly and privately, within and outside the House around these areas, for reasons too complex to explore here.
- **A sense of pastoral concern about the tone and content of the Statement.** Words matter and, while you will understand the word 'pastoral' in its historic, biblical and episcopal sense, the vast majority of clergy and laity, let alone the general public, see it as a word that conveys such virtues as love and care, compassion and justice. What has been published does not reflect that wider sense of the word. It reads as a policy, not a pastoral, statement. We suggest that addressing this pastoral deficit should begin with sincere repentance and public apology

by the House. Furthermore, we think that the House should also apologise to those of its members, not to mention others (including LGBT+ members of working groups), who have served at considerable cost of time and emotional energy, and whose work has been undermined by the ham-fisted timing of this Statement. We understand that, at the very time the Statement was issued, members of the *Living in Love and Faith* Coordinating Group were meeting together, in complete ignorance of the Statement that was to be published. The communication around this Statement has been woeful. We all deserve better, most of all them.

We believe that the ill-considered statement demonstrates once more the inability of the House of Bishops to connect with public attitudes, thus making the pastoral ministry of the clergy that much more difficult at a time when there is much good work going on among the millennial generation through *Renewal and Reform*. It is, to paraphrase Geoffrey Howe's famous speech, "rather like sending your opening batsmen to the crease only for them to find, the moment the first balls are bowled, that their bats have been broken before the game by the team captains."

It certainly needs to be made abundantly clear by the House that it has learned from the mistakes of late 2016 and 17. We cannot have a process that has encouraged genuine dialogue undermined because the House is unable to escape from its tendency to make 'Pastoral' Statements without engagement with those whose lives are most affected by the issues on which it pronounces.

We therefore respectfully ask that **the House of Bishops Statement be withdrawn, and a statement of apology made** for the timing of its release at the forthcoming General Synod.

Yours sincerely,

The Reverend Canon Simon Butler, Prolocutor of the Lower House of Canterbury;
The Reverend Canon Chris Newlands Prolocutor of the Lower House of York