

Our three Bishops respond after Synod sexuality debate

Dear Friends in Christ

Last week's meeting of General Synod addressed a wide range of issues, such as the role of lay people, problem gambling, wedding bans and pensions. However, the main focus of the synod was undoubtedly the debate on the House of Bishops' paper on *Marriage and Same Sex Relationships after the Shared Conversations*. You will know that the synod voted not to 'take note' of the report. It is clear from some of you who have been in touch that there is some confusion about what the vote means.

The House of Bishops' Statement (if you wish to read it click here: <https://goo.gl/yUNHM7>) represented a status report following the Shared Conversations, marking where we believe we have got to (rather than the last word on the subject) and set out a direction of travel. It proposed that the Church of England should not change its doctrine of marriage. It expressed 'penitence for the treatment some lesbian and gay people have received at the hands of the Church', called for a 'change of tone', proposed that canon law should be interpreted in a way that provides 'maximum freedom' for LGBTI+ people and that a comprehensive new teaching document should be produced. So what happened and what is the significance of the decision not to 'take note'?

The best way to understand it would be to listen to the entire debate (To listen, click here: <https://goo.gl/oPXsG>). However, for those of you who do not have time, the Church of England website described the vote as follows: *A take note debate is a neutral motion which allows Synod to discuss the content and recommendations contained in a report without committing the Synod to the formal acceptance of any matter. The vote required simple majorities in each of the three Synodical Houses. A total of 242 people voted in favour of the report 184 against and 6 abstentions – with a majority of Synod members voting to “take note” of the report. However the report failed to obtain a simple majority in the House of Clergy. The House of Bishops voted 43 in favour and 1 against. The House of Clergy voted 93 in favour and 100 against with 2 abstentions. The House of Laity voted 106 in favour and 83 against with 4 abstentions.*

As a result of last Wednesday's vote there is no change to the doctrine, canon law or current pastoral practice of the Church of England. A vote to 'take note' would have had exactly the same result. The debate gave the Synod and all those in the church the opportunity to listen to the views expressed about the report and the direction of travel. Following the debate the Archbishops of Canterbury and York issued a helpful letter (<http://bit.ly/2kCy9UR>) in which they set out the next steps in response to the debate and the vote. We want to repeat one of the paragraphs which we feel is particularly helpful and which must inform all our discussions: 'In these discussions no person is a problem, or an issue. People are made in the image of God. All of us, without exception, are loved and called in Christ. There are no 'problems', there are simply people called to redeemed humanity in Christ'.

We would also want to reiterate what we said in our statement to the diocese before the debate: 'We want to underline our longing that all the churches, chaplaincies and church schools within the Diocese of St Albans should be places where all people are welcomed, respected and honoured'. We believe that we must continue to oppose all expression of homophobia in society and in the church.

As bishops we are grateful to all those who have written to us with constructive reflections and proposals over recent weeks. Due to the volume of correspondence, we regret that we have not been able to respond to every point that has been made. We encourage you to keep on contributing to the debate and discussions as together we discern the way forward.

Over the coming weeks in response to the request of the Archbishops we will be convening meetings of the St Albans General Synod members to discuss the way forward in the light of the Archbishops' letter. At the same time, we hope that everyone will redouble their efforts to continue the discussions and 'make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace' (Ephesians 4.3). We hope that we will all pledge to pray for one another as we seek God's guidance over the coming months.

signed: +Alan St Albans, +Richard Bedford, +Michael Hertford