

Gilchrist, S. (2020): "The barriers to listening need to be broken down" :*Church Times*, 11 December 2020 <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/11-december/comment/opinion/the-barriers-to-listening-need-to-be-broken-down>

# The barriers to listening need to be broken down

11 DECEMBER 2020

The Living in Love and Faith process will work only if Anglicans pay attention to the stories of real people, not sectional viewpoints, says *Susan Gilchrist*



THE results of the Church of England's [Living in Love and Faith](#) (LLF) process have been long awaited. It has been studying issues of [gender](#) and [sexuality](#) ([News, 13 November](#)) for a Church whose divisions have been put into sharper focus because of society's changing perspectives and practices, especially in relation to lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual, and intersex people.

The aim of the process is to create a radical new vision of inclusion, and help the Church to understand what it means to follow Christ in love and

faith in regard to the questions about human identity and the variety of patterns of relationship which are emerging in our society. These include [marriage](#), [civil partnership](#), cohabitation, celibacy, and friendship.

*Living in Love and Faith* notes (on page 3) that the programme makes no recommendations or guarantees about an agreed way forward in relation to identity, sexuality, relationships, and marriage. The resources are intended, the Bishops say, only to initiate a process of “whole-church learning and engagement”.

That vision demands a truly listening Church. Already, many people have passed judgement on the material — some even before it was released. Instead of commenting in detail on the report, however, I want to examine what true listening and radical inclusion mean.

TOO often in society, there is not true listening. Instead, barriers are created, because of misunderstanding, ignorance, suspicion, and hatred. One of the main reasons for this is disputes about the origins of these conditions.

One group, mainly from the feminist movements, argues that they are forms of paraphilia: a disruption of the normal path of development, which is driven by sublimated sexual motivations. The other group, which represents a consensus among the professional medical institutions, argues that it they are personality variations, within the normal range of human development, and are driven, instead, by the search for identity. The methods of management are almost opposite to one another, depending on which of these diagnoses is chosen.

The capacity for listening is destroyed when people on one side attack the other with accusations of malpractice, and say dismissively that “Their teaching is backed by no credible science but has been adopted by government, the NHS, schools, and therapists” — as a [statement](#) on the Transgender Trend website does; or when people on the other side respond, in equal measure, by threatening and disrupting their opponents’ meetings; or when Christian groups refuse even to consider the possibility of reinterpretation of an entrenched theological position.

What does the gospel tell us about such disputes? In St John’s Gospel, Thomas says to Jesus: “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” When Philip, in the same passage, says to Jesus, “Lord, show us the Father,” he is asking for Jesus to prove his statement, but Jesus does not prove it; instead, he describes journeys that people

make: “In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?”

Thus, when Jesus responds to Thomas by saying, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life,” he is telling his disciples not to rely on the sort of evidence that Philip wants, but to follow the example of how he lives his life, and how other people live their lives. He reinforces this statement by saying: “No one comes to the Father except through me” and “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.” That seems to rule out other approaches.

When, in the admittedly apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, Jesus tells people to “Become passers-by”, he is telling them not to listen to the machinations of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Instead, for true listening, he implies, listen first to the stories and experiences of real people, not to the pundits of his time — or even to those in our present Church.

ALL lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people disrupt the accepted order of any society in which gender complementary is socially and legally enforced. This is regardless of the morality of their acts.

For historical reasons, a sexual motive has always been presumed; but listening to the experiences of gender and sexually variant people shows that the driving forces behind them are, instead, those of love and identity.

Then, for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. That refers, without exception, to all people who seek to live their lives in ways that fulfil the love of Christ — and that welcome includes transgender, transsexual, lesbian, gay, heterosexual, and bisexual people. Those who seek to express their identities in roles that are true to themselves must be fully accepted in their own right. If we are truly to build the house of many rooms which Jesus refers to, we must listen to one another with love and respect.

Sadly, and too often, instead of seeking to listen, we use what we hear about one another to condemn those with whom we disagree. Listening becomes more difficult if the condemnations become too great, and it may be made impossible if criminalisation occurs. To listen with an open mind is all that is asked.

Jesus was despised and rejected because he broke the mould. Instead of trying to prove our own agendas by attempting to turn [science](#) and [theology](#) into weapons that we use to condemn others, we should follow the example of Jesus, who refused to give Philip the proof

that he wanted. Instead, Jesus showed that the way is through the example of the way he lived his life.

It is by following this pattern of listening and caring that we come to know Jesus. “If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” In this spirit, then, let us resolve to go forward and make this house of Jesus a home where love can dwell: a house where all are welcomed, and a house that shines with the love of Christ.



YOUTUBE.COM

*A still from the Living in Love and Faith promotional video*

THE Bishops tell us that the intention is to discern the way forward over the next two years to gain the radical inclusion that is sought. As a scientist and academic, I appreciate and understand the importance of using intensive and objective knowledge and engaging in thorough research.

As a contributor to and supporter of the LLF programme, I welcome the publication of this work, although I do have concerns about some of the material in the book. But it is more than 480 pages long, and extensive study programmes are also provided.

The Bishops say, as I mention above, that the resources are intended only to initiate a process of “whole-church learning and engagement”; thus, this work is yet another in the long line of many Church of England reports

and documents that talk about the problems with gender and sexuality without tackling them.

Certain groups are already intent on preparing guides to *LLF* which will satisfy the sectional viewpoints of their own members, who may also have little interest in digesting the mass of material that has been provided; or too little information or time. With so little guidance from the LLF programme, this information becomes open to abuse.

This potential is already evident in the issue of two videos timed to coincide with the release of the LLF resources. *The Beautiful Story*, from the Church of England Evangelical Council ([News, 20 November](#)), has already been defended by the [Bishop of Blackburn](#), the Rt Revd Julian Henderson “as not being intended to shut down or derail conversations about sexuality” ([Online News, 26 November](#)) .

A second video, produced by Christian Concern, takes the videos that the LLF programme has produced for its own educational purposes and edits them without permission by interspersing them with its own comments.

Not only is that an attack on the good faith of the people who contributed to the original videos: it also disregards their safeguarding concerns, it almost certainly breaches copyright, and it is being investigated as hate crime by the police ([Online News, 30 November](#)). Other videos representing different viewpoints could have been presented. In citing these videos, my aim is not to highlight their theologies, but to illustrate how listening is denied.

Surely, however, the essence of the gospel is in the hearts and minds of people, a gospel of love, rather than in any institutions or dogmas that are created.

THE condemnations that Jesus applies to the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23.33: “You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?”, or, elsewhere, in Luke 11.37-54, are hardly moderate in tone. When taken out of context, the statement by Jesus “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” could be used by any pundit to reinforce any argument; but when it is taken in the context of the passage, as it must be, it demands a truly listening Church.

Properly used, the LLF material provides a valuable resource; but, unless we find the radical sense of listening and inclusion which Jesus presents, and, until we fully embrace one another in the gospel of Christian love, we will continue to make the churches less relevant to the needs of people, and of society, and become “passers-by” in the world.

*Susan Gilchrist is a retired academic. She is a committee member of Sibyls, a Christian group for transgender people and their friends and family, and a former chair of the LGBTI Anglican Coalition.*