

A briefing paper on the House of Bishops' Pastoral Guidance on using the Affirmation of Baptismal Faith with transgender people,

produced by Christina Beardsley & Susan Gilchrist on behalf of the General Synod Human Sexuality Group, February 2019.

Q. Why was the Bishops' Guidance needed?

A. In response to a pastoral need. The Guidance is the end point of a process that began in a parish in the northern Province when a young transgender man requested prayer in his parish church. The Blackburn Diocesan Synod motion developed from that pastoral encounter and was passed in deanery and diocesan synods and finally, with an overwhelming majority, in the General Synod in July 2017.

Q. What is the theological basis of the Guidance?

A. Some people argue that the theological work about trans people has yet to be done, but the Blackburn Motion rests on the theological foundations that all are made in the image of God and of our redemption through our Lord Jesus Christ. To quote GS 1178, An Update on 'Welcoming Transgender People':

The House of Bishops welcomes and encourages the unconditional affirmation of trans people, equally with all people, within the Church, the body of Christ, and rejoices in the diversity of that one body, into which all Christians have been baptized by one Spirit.

As long ago as 2003, the Church of England's House of Bishops agreed that Christians could validly accept transgender people's identity, and in the intervening years some trans people have married in church or been ordained as priests. Individuals may wish to familiarise themselves with recent theological work in this subject area,¹ but that does not mean that the Guidance is premature. On the contrary, the Guidance has sent a positive message to an often marginalised and misunderstood group within society.

Q. What are some people's concerns about the Guidance?

A. Some people claim that a debate is needed about trans people's experience and the ethics of gender transition. Others question the benefits of transition, despite evidence to the contrary.² Those who hold these views tend to focus on the medical diagnosis of 'gender dysphoria' and ignore the international multi-disciplinary consensus that being transgender is a human variation not a pathology.

The scientific consensus regards gender variant identities and behaviour as naturally expected variations of the human condition arising very early in development. Differentiations in the foetal brain lead to the creation of gender identities that are indelible from the moment of birth.³ These cannot be changed either by the individual concerned or by the predations or recruitment of others in subsequent life. This is the position of the British Royal College of Psychiatrists, the British Psychological Society and parallel United Kingdom organizations. Each of the major UK medical and therapeutic bodies has signed a memorandum of understanding strongly condemning attempts to 'cure' gender variant people by persuading them not to transition, or, if they have done so, to de-transition.⁴

This position is also supported by the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association. Other international mental health organizations, including the World Health Organization have followed. All these organizations are signatories to the World Professional Association for Transgender Health Standards of Care, Version 7, which represents the consensus view.

¹ A reading list is available at <https://www.inclusive-church.org/news/reading-list-transgender-people-and-christianity>

² For a review of the academic literature, see: Cornell University (2019): 'What does the scholarly research say about the effect of gender transition on transgender well-being?': What We Know Project: <https://whatweknow.inequality.cornell.edu/topics/lgbt-equality/what-does-the-scholarly-research-say-about-the-well-being-of-transgender-people/>

³ Roughgarden, J. 2017. Homosexuality and Evolution: A Critical Appraisal. In *On Human Nature: Biology, Psychology, Ethics, Politics, & Religion*. Ed. Tibayrenc, M. & F.J. Ayala. London, San Diego CA, Cambridge MA & Oxford: Academic Press, pp. 501-2.

⁴ MoU Version 2 signatories: Royal College of General Practitioners, UK Council for Psychotherapy, British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, British Psychoanalytic Council, British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies, The British Psychological Society, College of Sexual and Relationship Therapists, The Association of LGBT Doctors and Dentists, The National Counselling Society, NHS Scotland, Pink Therapy, the Scottish Government and Stonewall.

Q. Does the Guidance signal a change in pastoral policy, liturgy or doctrine?

A. No. It simply restates the current position agreed by the House of Bishops in 2003 and authorises use of the renewal of baptismal vows when trans people seek prayer following transition.

Q. Why might some people in the Church be concerned about transgender people?

A. There are several answers!

- The thought that trans people disrupt ideas of what it is to be male and female, and gender roles.

Society's understanding of gender has been changing for many decades, regardless of trans people. Some transgender people conform to conventional gender presentation and roles, others – e.g. nonbinary people – may not relate to either gender. Trans people are a minority population and this particular concern exaggerates the extent of their influence on wider society.

- That being transgender is a current fad

The rise of the modern media has made transgender people more visible, but gender variant people have existed in all societies and cultures including biblical times⁵.

- That being transgender can be 'caught'

The evidence base is clear that gender identity is fixed early in life and not susceptible to influence. The care and treatment of children and young people who identify as gender variant is very conservatively managed and ideas to the contrary are much exaggerated. Children and young people have been gender nonconforming for decades, such as female 'tom-boys'. Giving children the freedom to explore their gender identities enables them to find them, not to choose them. Most gender nonconforming young people do not grow up to be trans, but the distress can be very real and lasting for some of those who do. Selective use of scientific and other evidence about trans people by pressure groups and the press is troubling. A full and objective use of all current research is required.

Q. What about society more generally?

A. Inadvertently, the recent consultation on reforming the UK's Gender Recognition Act 2004 raised a quite separate issue about the safety of women-only spaces. Some lesbians and other feminists seemed to imply that trans women are not women. The Government's rejoinder that 'trans women are women and trans men are men' was a reaffirmation of the 2004 Act and the 2010 Equality Act, which the Church of England follows with only limited exceptions. The Government's position also highlighted that these discussions often ignore transgender men, whereas the statistics show that trans men make up almost half the adult trans population. Trans women can generate greater social anxiety than trans men and may experience verbal and physical abuse as a consequence. The majority of trans women unreservedly endorse the protection of women's safety in single-sex spaces, such as refuges, toilets etc., that the law currently provides.

Q. What might transgender people be looking for from their church?

A. For the Church to

- *signal that trans people are welcome*
- *be a safe space for them, and for family and friends journeying with them*
- *listen and learn from their experience*
- *be a place where they are not required to hide who they are*
- *recognise the honesty and integrity of their particular journey within the love of Christ*
- *understand that their experience is about being true to their own sense of self*
- *have their loved ones supported and their relationships affirmed*
- *be open to their requests for prayer & offer resources to mark significant life events*
- *treat them equally with everyone else in the ministry and mission of the church*
- *not presume that they have automatically fallen from grace just for being who they are*

⁵ See Mollenkott, V. R. 2001. *Omnigender: a trans-religious approach*. Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press.