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Human Sexuality Task Group report (for General Assembly)

Mission Council is invited to decide whether this report, and the draft resolution on the registration of Civil Partnerships in church premises (with its supporting text) should be taken to General Assembly in July.

Introduction

By the time of Assembly the task group will have been in existence for almost four years. It was set up by Mission Council in response to the Commitment on Human Sexuality that was agreed by the Assembly in 2007. Once the group had had time to get to grips with the subject, the immediate task was to address the eleven questions which the Assembly had raised as consequential to the Commitment. Its response to nine of them was included in the Mission Council report to Assembly 2010. The response to the remaining two will be reported later.

Also in this first phase of its life the task group did some work on the connection between unity and diversity in the life of the church. As a result, some ideas and some questions were also included in the report to Assembly and people were invited to respond. Sadly no response was received.

The second phase

In the period 2010-12 the task group has looked to moving the discussion forward and in the process has dealt with the two outstanding issues from 2007. It has placed particular emphasis on how people discuss human sexuality issues, suggesting that the sensitivity of the subject means that it is best discussed in smaller groups where people know and trust each other. In that connection the task group has promulgated the use of some guidelines on good conversation which were copied with permission from the Methodist Church in Norway. They have been put on the URC website.

The task group tested its own understanding of the subject by meeting, on separate occasions, representatives of the Group on Evangelism and Renewal and the URC Gay and Lesbian Caucus.

The task group has kept in touch with the ecumenical discussion of the subject, in particular by following discussions in the General Assemblies of the Church of Scotland and the Presbyterian Church of Ghana. It has been a particular help that Val Morrison (a co-Moderator of Assembly and also a member of the task group) was present in both of those Assemblies.

However, the major concern of the group has been to use all the information, ideas and experience that has come its way to consider whether the 2007 Commitment can still be the basis for the United Reformed Church to continue its life in unity and to resolve current questions on human sexuality. With that in mind the task group got permission to set up a major consultation which was held at Westminster College, Cambridge, in September 2011.

The Westminster College consultation

In addition to the task group members and those asked to help in leadership roles, membership of the consultation was by invitation. Each synod was invited to nominate two people and an effort was made to ensure that all three of the positions defined in the Commitment were represented. FURY also sent a representative. A report on the consultation was sent to every synod and was posted on the website: for that reason it is not repeated here. However, from reflections received from some of the participants as well as discussion in the task group itself, some conclusions can be suggested.

- (a) There is no evidence that anyone changed his or her mind as a result of the consultation. The most that was achieved was a better understanding and appreciation of others' convictions.
- (b) The consultation itself provided plenty of evidence that it is possible for Christian people with strong and diverse convictions on sensitive issues of human sexuality to talk together in an atmosphere of mutual respect and concern. However, that is sometimes very demanding.
- (c) Although the Commitment defines people as falling into one of three categories, in fact within each category there are significant varieties of emphasis. Some people feel sympathy with more than one category. Human sexuality is a very complex subject and attempts to simplify it are unlikely to be successful and may damage fellowship.
- (d) However intractable are our differences of conviction, the grace of God is able to overcome them all. The consultation ended around the Lord's Table where, under the Cross, all the participants shared the Peace and ate from the one loaf. Unity is hard but it is the demand of the Gospel.

The future of the 2007 Commitment

The task group is led to the conclusion that the Commitment remains the best basis for the United Reformed Church to order its life and continue its discussion of human sexuality issues. It would be possible to refine the text in some places but that would not change the essential value of the Commitment itself. The value lies in its honesty in admitting the differences of conviction that exist; in its commitment to journeying on together; and in its recognition of the total dependence of all of us on the grace that is given through Jesus Christ.

There seems no better basis than that with which the Commitment ends: *In love and submission to Christ who holds us together, we therefore commit ourselves to stay together, to work and pray together, to treat one another with respect, and to seek God's gifts of unity, harmony, wisdom and deeper understanding.*

Widening the discussion

The task group has found it difficult to promote any wider discussion of human sexuality issues. Many of the reasons why people are reluctant to enter such discussion have been rehearsed above. However the experience of the consultation has encouraged the task group to produce a booklet and a CD aimed to help people in local churches in their own way and at the right time to discuss issues of our identity and relationships as human beings. It may be difficult but it is also fundamental. The help of the Communications office at Church House and also the Revd Ernie Rea (former head of religious broadcasting at the BBC) in this project is gladly acknowledged.

Towards a theology of same-sex relationships

One of the outstanding requests of the 2007 Assembly was for the provision of a theology of same-sex relationships. The task group invited the Revd Dr John Bradbury to present such a theology at the Westminster College consultation and this was heard alongside a traditional exposition of the theology of sexual relationships presented by the Revd Paul Stokes. The task group subsequently discussed how these papers should be released to a wider audience and it was agreed that they should be issued together with the expectation that they would be read together. The papers were sent to all the synods towards the end of 2011 and were published on the website in January 2012. In both cases a paper from the Church of Scotland summarising the present state of medical science on these issues was appended.

Legal issues

This was the other area which the 2007 Assembly identified as needing further work. In the event the further thinking was focused around the Equality Act 2010 and its consequences in regard to the registration of Civil Partnerships on religious premises. The result of the work done on this in conjunction with the Law and Polity Advisory Group is presented as a separate paper. It will be seen that the resolution presented draws directly on what has been written above about the Assembly Commitment of 2007. The connection is of fundamental importance.