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Human Sexuality Task Group Consultation Statement

A consultation on human sexuality was held at Westminster College, Cambridge, from 14 to 16 September 2011. It was arranged as part of the work of the human sexuality task group of the Mission Council. All 13 synods and FURY were represented among the participants.

The background to the consultation was the Commitment on Human Sexuality agreed by the General Assembly in 2007 and endorsed by some of the synods thereafter.

A variety of topics were discussed with the invited speakers. The Revd Dr John Campbell spoke on the ways people use the Bible to do theology; the Revd Professor Neil Messer spoke about how Reformed churches come to a view on ethical issues; and two major papers entitled "Towards a theology of same-sex relationships" were presented by the Revd Dr John Bradbury and the Revd Paul Stokes, each speaking from a different perspective.

Papers on the present state of medical science (reprinted by permission of the Church of Scotland), and on the Equality Act as it affects the church, prepared by Mr Andrew Middleton, the church's legal adviser, were available to the consultation. Mrs Ann Leck, as the ecumenical participant, updated the consultation on the Methodist Church's discussion of human sexuality issues.

The consultation spent a good deal of its time in worship and Bible study, and specific times were set aside for silence. Perhaps the most valuable part of the experience was the time spent in small groups, deliberately arranged so that each contained people with very different convictions, where people had to experience what it means for Christians to disagree yet discover fellowship together. This was a demanding, yet ultimately rewarding, experience for most people.

The task group had invited the Revd Elizabeth Caswell to be the Facilitator for the consultation, and she made it clear from the beginning that there was no intention to come to conclusions or to make decisions. That intention was fulfilled! However, among the ideas that surfaced was the thought that the discussion ought to be widened to include other aspects of human sexuality, and the conflicting facts that this discussion could deflect attention from more pressing issues before the church as against the fact that this topic was already affecting other aspects of the church's concern. The value of facing difficult issues in small groups, as opposed to larger gatherings, was clear to all the participants.

At the end the convener of the task group, the Revd John Waller, assured the participants that he and his fellow members would be considering how to take this particular discussion forward within the general life of the church, as well as suggesting opportunities for dialogue to Mission Council in order that those coming to Assembly 2012 can be prepared to understand the issues created by the Equality Act in regard to the possibility of the registration of civil partnerships on church premises.