

wish to avoid because of the deliberate resemblance to marriage. Unfortunately, those bishops who spoke and voted on the Civil Partnerships Act in the House of Lords largely opposed an amendment designed to widen the provisions of the Act to include, for example, dependent siblings. There is still no justice for them!

Q. Isn't the church's teaching still the same, though?

A. Many bishops claim this is the case. In reality, though, the bishops have chosen to align church practice with a Government policy clearly designed to introduce 'same sex marriage' in all but name and ceremonial. This may still be the thin end of the wedge where society is concerned, but it is surely the whole wedge for the church!

Q. So what should we do?

A. When Peter was in error at Antioch, and the gospel was at stake, Paul opposed him 'to his face' (Galatians 2:11). The result was that Peter turned back from his mistake. Those of us who believe the bishops to have made a grievous error regarding the church and society are duty-bound to oppose them at this point and call them likewise to turn back.

Q. But don't the bishops have to stick to their agreed guidelines, whether they like it or not?

A. On the contrary, Peter Selby, the Bishop of Worcester, has already publicly broken ranks with the House of Bishops (see *Church Times*, 19th August 2005). As it happens, Selby criticizes the Statement for being too *restrictive*, but there is no reason why traditionalist bishops shouldn't also distance themselves from it.

Q. Shouldn't we just get on with preaching the gospel?

A. Of course we should be preaching the gospel, but the gospel calls us to turn away from sin: 'Do you not know that...neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor male prostitutes, nor homosexual offenders...will inherit the kingdom of God? (1 Corinthians 6:9). *The bishops say they agree.* Surely we are right to act accordingly?

The House of Bishop's Statement may be found in full at:
<http://www.cofe.anglican.org/news/pr5605.html>

This leaflet has been written by Revd John P Richardson.
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The Church of England, Civil Partnerships and the House of Bishops

On December 5th 2005 the Civil Partnership Act comes into force. On July 23rd 2005, the House of Bishops issued a 'pastoral statement' on the implications of the Act for the Church of England. This leaflet answers some questions about civil partnership and explains why the Statement by the House of Bishops is causing problems here and abroad.

Q. What is civil partnership?

A. In the Government's own words, civil partnership is a new legal relationship which 'gives same sex couples the ability to obtain legal recognition for their relationship.' (See the official website: www.womenandequalityunit.gov.uk)

Q. What is the difference between marriage and civil partnership?

A. The Government's reply is that civil partnership differs from marriage in the way each is contracted:

[A] civil partnership is formed when the second civil partner signs the relevant document, a civil marriage is formed when the couple exchange spoken words.

However, there are many similarities between civil partnership and marriage. For example couples may not register if they are under 16 (or 18 without parental consent), or if they are within one of the prohibited degrees of relationship for marriage, or if they already have a civil partnership or are married. The clear intention of the Government is that civil partnership should parallel marriage as much as possible.

Q. Can you contract a civil partnership within a religious ceremony?

A. No. Indeed, the Government says this is another difference from marriage:

Opposite-sex couples can opt for a religious or civil marriage ceremony as they choose, whereas formation of a civil partnership will be an exclusively civil procedure.

However, they omit to mention that a civil *marriage* is also a strictly non-religious affair. No religious words or symbolism are allowed at a civil ceremony in any venue other than a church. There is no prohibition on different faith groups offering a service of blessing following a civil partnership, just as for a civil marriage.

Q. So will the Church of England allow the blessing of civil partnerships?

A. No. The House of Bishops maintains that, 'Sexual relationships outside marriage, whether heterosexual or between people of the same sex, are regarded as falling short of God's purposes for human beings' (para 4). They therefore consider it would not be right to authorise any public liturgy with respect to civil partnerships (para 17).

Q. So if sex outside marriage is wrong, will the Church of England ban its members from entering into civil partnerships?

A. No. The bishops argue that since the Act does not actually *require* sexual intercourse for a partnership to be valid, it is *technically* possible for church members to enter into such a partnership and yet still remain celibate (para 11).

Q. How can the bishops be sure that people in civil partnerships will remain celibate?

A. They can't. What is more, the bishops say they normally shouldn't even be asked whether this is the case:

The House considers that lay people who have registered civil partnerships ought not to be asked to give assurances about the nature of their relationship before being admitted to baptism, confirmation and communion. (para 23)

Q. So might we have a vicar and his or her partner in the vicarage?

A. Yes. But in the case of clergy, the bishops have said they will seek assurances that the relationship is celibate (paras 19, 21).

Q. Why is there a different standard for clergy and for laity?

A. The bishops consider that clergy must uphold the teaching of the church. However, they also consider that anyone may legitimately disagree with the church's teaching (para 23) and that in the case of the laity, 'the conscientious decision of those who enter into homophile relationships must be respected' (para 6).

Q. So is the teaching of the Bible not clear?

A. The bishops believe it is clear. There has, of course, been a great deal of debate on this topic. However, after examining the evidence, the House of Bishops has concluded that the Bible teaches what it has always been held to teach:

...it is difficult to see that an appeal to the revisionist interpretation of the passages in question provides an adequate basis for a Church that takes the scholarly reading of Scripture seriously to alter either its traditional teaching about homosexuality or its traditional practice, however much it might seem desirable to do so on the basis of the pastoral considerations noted earlier. (*Some Issues in Human Sexuality*, 2003, 4.4.35)

Q. Doesn't this mean that the House of Bishops is being inconsistent?

A. It is hard to disagree with that!

Q. But shouldn't we still go along with what the bishops suggest?

A. The problem is that the bishops' Statement puts the Church of England at odds with much of the worldwide Anglican Communion. It also seems to

impose an unlawful requirement on those clergy who want to abide by the church's teaching in their own ministry.

Q. How does this affect the rest of the Anglican Communion?

A. In 1998, all the Anglican bishops gathered in London for the Lambeth Conference. In their resolution on Human Sexuality, they advised against 'the legitimising or blessing of same sex unions' and 'ordaining those involved in same gender unions' (Resolution 1.10.e). Unfortunately, the bishops' Statement clearly *legitimises* such unions and undertakes to *ordain* people involved in them, thereby contravening a resolution the bishops have said they will uphold. This has created major difficulties in many parts of the Anglican Communion. Archbishop Akinola of Nigeria, whose Province is the biggest outside the UK, has written of his 'utter dismay' at the Statement, calling on the House of Bishops to renounce it.

Q. How does it affect the ministry of our own clergy?

A. The Statement says that laypeople in civil partnerships 'ought not' to be asked about the nature of their relationship before admission to the Sacraments. However, the bishops agree that same-sex activity is against the teaching of the Bible, and the Articles of the Church of England say that it is 'not lawful' for the church to ordain anything contrary to Scripture (Article XX). The bishops therefore seem to be imposing an unlawful demand on their clergy.

Q. If a Christian is in a civil partnership, shouldn't we just assume it is celibate?

A. Unfortunately, the bishop's Statement itself assumes it may *not* be celibate! On the contrary, they say that 'the ambiguities surrounding the character and public nature of civil partnerships' create 'perceptions and assumptions which...inevitably accompany a decision to register such a relationship' (para 22). In other words, the nature of a civil partnership means that there will always be grounds for questioning whether it is celibate.

Q. But don't the bishops have to go along with the law of the land?

A. Apparently they could have chosen a different route. Jonathan Neil-Smith, the Secretary to the House of Bishops, wrote in a recent letter,

In relation to the church's room for manoeuvre in relation to the law [...] there will no doubt be denominations or faith groups who will regard being in a civil partnership as intrinsically incompatible with membership of their ordained ministries. That is the position of the Roman Catholic Church. The law does not preclude that approach where the prohibition is based on doctrine or religious conviction.

Q. Isn't the Civil Partnership Act righting an injustice?

A. Some would argue that. However, you can only take advantage of its provisions by entering into a relationship which most faithful Christians will