

A response to the House of Bishops' "Pastoral Guidance for use in conjunction with the Affirmation of Baptismal Faith in the context of gender transition"

The House of Bishops' ['Pastoral Guidance for use in conjunction with the Affirmation of Baptismal Faith in the context of gender transition'](#) and an accompanying press release (December 11th, 2018) have raised a number of serious questions and aroused deep concerns.

This statement seeks to articulate and begin to address some of these by exploring a number of questions. We hope to enable evangelicals and others to understand what has been done and its potential significance. We also seek clarification and reconsideration from the House of Bishops in relation to their guidance.

What is the background?

The Pastoral Guidance is the latest response from the House of Bishops to the [General Synod overwhelmingly passing a motion in July 2017 from Blackburn Diocesan Synod](#)

The motion reads:

that this Synod, recognising the need for transgender people to be welcomed and affirmed in their parish church, call on the House of Bishops to consider whether some nationally commended liturgical materials might be prepared to mark a person's gender transition.

An initial response 'An update on 'Welcoming Transgender People'' ([GS Misc 1178](#)) was published by the House of Bishops in January 2018 ([press release](#)). This declined to produce a new service specifically to mark a person's gender transition but stated that

baptism and confirmation are the normative ways of marking a new or growing faith in Jesus Christ. If the enquirer is already baptized and confirmed, the House notes that the Affirmation of Baptismal Faith, found in Common Worship, is an ideal liturgical rite which trans people can use to mark this moment of personal renewal.

The response promised that further guidance would be provided on how to use the *Common Worship* service for the Affirmation of Baptismal Faith as a way of 'welcoming and affirming transgender people.' This is what has now been issued.

What is to be welcomed in the Pastoral Guidance?

There is much in the guidance to be welcomed. For example, the following affirmations helpfully guide us in responding to those who identify as transgender and who experience gender dysphoria:

- We all "find our true identity in Christ"
- We should give "priority to the original and authentic baptism of the individual as the sacramental beginning of the Christian life"
- "The image of God, in which we are all made, transcends gender, race, and any other characteristic"
- In "all pastoral encounters with people negotiating major life events, ministers will wish to respond sensitively and creatively to the person's circumstances"
- "Trans people are as diverse as any other social group and ministers should avoid stereotyping".
- Trans people are to be welcomed "equally with all people" in the body of Christ.

What have the bishops done liturgically and theologically?

A major problem with the guidance is the surface ambiguity about what the bishops have done. In line with their earlier statement, the guidance is described in its title as relating to “the Affirmation of Baptismal Faith *in the context of gender transition*” (italics added). Such guidance could be provided in order to enable ministers to embody the truths set out above when discussing affirmation of baptismal faith (or baptism and confirmation) with those who have transitioned. This would help ensure that the service itself is sensitive to their situation.

The [press release](#) however is headed “Guidance for gender transition services published”. It states that “New guidance for parishes planning services to help transgender people mark their transition has been published by the Church of England”. This is a legitimate summary because para 2 of the guidance says (italics added):

the House of Bishops commends the rite of Affirmation of Baptismal Faith *as the central feature of any service to recognize liturgically a person’s gender transition*.

The bishops, in other words, are not simply commending the existing liturgy and guiding clergy as to how to use it sensitively and as intended when it was authorised. They are commending it as a rite to be used for a quite separate liturgical end. This is one in which the Church of England would be declaring liturgically on behalf of God its acceptance of the claim that someone who is biologically male is in fact female or that someone who is biologically female is in fact male.

What have the bishops done legally?

In their discussion in [GS2055](#) (on whether and how to offer guidance to clergy in shaping prayers following a civil partnership) the House distinguished between authorised and commended services. It gave reasons for rejecting both options (paras 39-43).

We appear here to have a hybrid liturgy, not just theologically but legally. Whilst there has been a refusal to authorise or commend a service to mark or recognise a person’s gender transition, the House now commends a quite different authorised rite “as the central feature” of a service “to recognize liturgically a person’s gender transition”. In contrast to GS2055, it is unclear whether legal advice was sought about this proposal or what that advice stated.

There are also questions as to the legal and disciplinary implications of issuing pastoral guidance on this for clergy. For example, if clergy use the rite of Affirmation of Baptismal Faith with someone who has transitioned, are they now legally required to follow all this guidance? More significantly, does this statement by the bishops not make it pastorally and perhaps legally more difficult for clergy to refuse requests for a service “to recognise liturgically a person’s gender transition”? Neither in GS Misc 1178 nor in this new guidance is anything said about the right of Church of England ministers to conscientiously refuse to conduct such a service or allow it in their church. This raises concerns that such ministers have no guarantee of support from the Church of England if they are accused of being ‘transphobic’ if they refuse such a service.

What is meant by “celebratory” and “unconditional affirmation”?

The guidance states that “The Church of England welcomes and encourages the unconditional affirmation of trans people, equally with all people, within the body of Christ” and that any service “should have a celebratory character”.

Affirmation of baptismal faith, like both the gospel and dying and rising with Christ in baptism, is never simply about “unconditional affirmation” of anyone. It involves confession of faith and a personal decision in which there is renunciation, repentance and turning to Christ. Whilst any service focussed on a person’s affirmation of baptismal faith clearly should be celebratory, the language of “service” was previously used in the guidance for a “service to recognize liturgically a person’s gender transition”. A celebratory liturgical recognition of a process of gender transition is very different from celebratory affirmation of baptismal faith by someone following gender transition. It raises major questions for many Christians.

This is because many Christians who accept the legitimacy of transition in certain circumstances would understand it in terms of painful necessity, a consequence of our fallen existence, and a form of pastoral accommodation and not as a cause of celebration.

In addition, many Christians view gender transition as a rejection of God’s good purposes in creation and so something that is contrary to God’s will. As such, it should not be undertaken, however desirable it might seem. It certainly should not be celebrated by the Church, particularly in the context of submitting to Christ as Lord. This is because human beings do not bear the image of God in an asexual manner. God created human beings to bear his image as embodied creatures who are either male or female (Genesis 1:26-28 and 2:18-24). We are called to witness to this created good as the church and to live thankfully within this dimorphic sexual pattern. This means accepting the sex into which we were born as God’s good gift to us, however problematic we may experience it to be.

The language of “celebratory” in this context therefore signals a particular evaluation of gender transition. This evaluation has never been theologically justified or previously stated by the Church of England and it is not shared by many faithful Anglicans.

What guidance is given concerning the minister’s pastoral responsibilities?

The guidance helpfully highlights the need for sensitivity to the individual’s pastoral needs and preferences. What it fails to do, however, is to give consideration to what the sort of service proposed in the Pastoral Guidance would communicate to others, including the members of the individual’s family.

As [Ian Paul notes](#) (using the terms in which such questions are likely to be phrased), we are compelled, out of simple pastoral concern, to ask

What does this mean for the wife who feels devastated by her husband who decides he is trans? For the children who feel abandoned? What does it mean for parents who feel that their child has died, and that they need to come to terms with this new person? And what does it mean for marriage, given that the Church does not recognise same-sex marriages? Are a woman and her former husband, now a trans woman, still married or not?

The Pastoral Guidance does not provide help for those who will have to deal with such deeply-felt emotions within families.

In addition, there also needs to be consideration of anyone in the congregation, and particularly young people, who are themselves struggling with gender dysphoria. What impact will such a service have on them and those supporting them? Again, serious pastoral matters do not seem to be addressed by the Pastoral Guidance.

What does the guidance say biblically?

Although the guidance does not offer new prayers or liturgy it significantly offers possible “appropriate readings” from Scripture which “may be used”. The selection here makes obvious the focus on providing episcopal guidance for a service to “recognize liturgically a person’s gender transition”. The use of Scripture is a major cause of concern, particularly given the lack otherwise of any theological explanation or rationale for such a liturgical recognition.

Some of the texts cited are appropriate for any affirmation of baptismal faith. However, their inclusion here and the summary offered of them could signal a particular theological interpretation of the transgender experience and nature of transition. For example, the use of Gal 3.27-4.7 and the claim that “in baptism into Christ there is no longer male and female” (the summary omits Paul’s reference to Jew/Gentile or slave/free). Others, drawing on readings used in liturgies which have been developed specifically to mark transition, use texts in which God calls and renames someone (eg Genesis 17 and 32), implying that a similar divine call and renaming is what has happened through transition. The inclusion of Matthew 7.7-11 similarly has little obvious connection to affirmation of baptismal faith but points to the transition being God’s answer to, and provision for, the person.

The reading of Scripture is central in Anglican liturgy. It is often a means of teaching the congregation, from the Bible, what they are doing in the liturgy. This selection of readings therefore offers episcopally commended biblical teaching. It teaches us how to interpret the experience of gender transition. Yet it has been given no theological or hermeneutical justification. It will be seen by many as a serious abuse of Scripture.

How was the guidance produced and shaped theologically?

The Synod debate which initiated the process rejected an amendment which asked “the House of Bishops to consider the theological, pastoral and other issues that gender transition raises for the Church”. However, at the close of the debate, the Archbishop of York was clear that “the theology has to be done”. The theology is being done in the *Living in Love and Faith (LLF)* project whose work ([GS Misc 1158](#)) was announced at the same July 2017 Synod that passed the motion on welcoming transgender people. But there is no evidence that this work, due to be completed in 2020, has contributed to this guidance.

Furthermore, elements of what is proposed undercut the *LLF* process by deciding in advance what the Church of England’s approach to gender transition is and, by extension, what its understanding of human sexual identity, should be.

It appears that, in developing the guidance, the bishops rightly and wisely sought the input of a number of people “who have a personal interest in this matter and who have also consulted widely with those directly affected, and their clergy”. Those named represent one particular interpretation, theological approach and pressure group in relation to these matters. Their perspective appears to have shaped much of the guidance, including its theology. It is unclear whether any other theological perspectives were included. The process certainly appears to be much less rigorous and representative an approach than that being followed by *LLF*.

Conclusion

The Church of England holds to the principle that our prayers express what we believe (*lex orandi, lex credendi*). As this new guidance will be included in *Common Worship*, its support for services liturgically recognising a person’s gender transition, and the theological views contained in the guidance for such services, are of both liturgical and doctrinal significance.

Although the bishops have declined the request to issue a new formal liturgy they have encouraged a new liturgical act. They seem to have proposed a hybrid liturgy for such services. They do so by commending a

properly approved rite which should express our baptismal unity to be used to do something else and something new liturgically. This innovative use is both highly divisive and theologically and pastorally questionable. It also risks raising serious concerns both within the wider Anglican Communion and ecumenically.

Although the bishops have not issued a new formal teaching, they have issued pastoral guidance which makes theological judgments. They have done so through what appears to be a flawed process; a process which lacked theological scrutiny and bypassed the existing structures for such theological discernment. These judgments develop and narrow previous teaching. They do so in ways that many Anglicans view as reversing that teaching to establish a position which is incompatible with biblical revelation and the Church's traditional understanding of what it means to be human.

We recognise that some in the church will share our understanding of the nature and significance of this step and welcome it. Others may think our interpretation of the guidance flawed. We believe, however, that our interpretation is widely and legitimately held. We, and we believe many others, are concerned as to the consequences of this development.

We therefore seek and hope for reassuring clarifications and, where necessary, modifications from the House of Bishops in relation to the Guidance.

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Note on CEEC and Further Resources

The Church of England Evangelical Council (CEEC) is a network of networks, bringing evangelicals in the Church of England together for the sake of the gospel. It is committed to producing and commending to The Church of England, and the work of *LLF*, resources for teaching. It also seeks to encourage faithful pastoral care in line with the teaching of Scripture and the witness borne to Scripture by traditional orthodox Anglican theology.

In relation to questions of transgender we welcome [*Transformed*](#), the recent publication by the Evangelical Alliance. We also commend, as a basis for further study, two books by the CEEC's theological consultant Martin Davie, *Transgender Liturgies?* (Latimer Trust 2017) and the forthcoming *Glorify God in Your Body* (CEEC, 2018/9).