

ELAINE

Who are you?

I'm Elaine Storkey, academic, Senior Member of Newnham College, Cambridge since 2008, former President of Tearfund, director of London Institute of Contemporary Society, lecturer at Oxford, London and with the Open University. Author and broadcaster.

What's your role been in the LLF process?

I was a consultant member of the Coordinating Group, and its only lay member. I was part of the group that shaped the overall structure of the project. I was also involved in developing the course, taking part in podcasts and a film, and on the media group. And then being involved with those who had worked in specialist groups working on the book

What have you learned so far by being involved?

When to keep quiet! It has been an important time for listening. Very little of what I have heard has been new, but having the authentic voice of trans people in the group has been important. It is always encouraging to see how much of the Christian faith we share with those with whom we disagree theologically, and even learn to enjoy the differences. However, being part of the discussions with the working groups in LLF reminded me how defensive some people can become when other people are not saying what they want them to hear. I benefited from the work of a lot of other academic scholars and enjoyed their papers, especially since many of them were on areas I have worked in myself. Julian Rivers on the history of marriage law was a great bonus, and I always appreciate Chris Wright.

What challenged you and how did you challenge others?

I was part of the North London Centre for Group Therapy for twelve years, and we had group sessions every Friday, so I am no stranger to people sharing personal issues in depth in group context. However, it took a few weeks before the co-ordination group could even approach that level of openness and I found this frustrating. Unless we heard something about the central values, faith, life-experiences, Christian commitments and outlook of those we were working with, it was never going to be possible to pull something like this off. However, once we decided to do this (having voiced my frustration) things became very much better. We put aside the 'sticky notes' and began to share stories very intentionally after a meal. As the months progressed, I was expecting different interpretations of Scripture and we got them. It was reassuring in fact that the Bible had an important place in most people's' faith. I was expecting less the resistance (and fear) that became evident about re-asserting a more historic Christian understanding of human sexuality in the course. The level of anxiety about ending the course with a film depicting a long-term faithful marriage relationship was palpable! We changed it. I was aware that for some sexuality (or gender, or being trans) seemed to sum up the whole of identity, when my own understanding of human personhood and experience has always been bigger. I was constantly challenged to be patient, especially with members of the wider group who kept insisting that they were not being heard. In reality, they were being heard, but not necessarily agreed with.

What's your top tip for those getting involved in parish, deanery and diocesan discussions?

Be open, don't approach other people looking for disagreements. There will be plenty, but we always have something to learn from others. Look for common ground; recognise that none of us has all the answers. Listen in prayer as others are sharing things that are difficult for them. Use the Bible in order to hear what God might be saying to everyone in the room, rather than to prove your own point. Want the best for other people, Pray that the Holy Spirit will draw you together in truth. Be as gentle as you can be and ask God to give you love for those with whom you are discussing. Don't be afraid of holding a position which others disagree with.