

Visibly Different

Updating Addendum

The text of *Visibly Different* was finalised in early 2020 and, as we all know, the situation in this country and in the world has changed radically since then due to the combined impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

However, in terms of the matters discussed in *Visibly Different* very little has changed since 2020.

The *Living in Love and Faith* (LLF) suite of resources was published in November 2020 and as predicted in paragraph 3.1.37 of *Visibly Different* these resources ‘survey the various positions on human sexuality held in the Church of England and explain why they are held.’ They do not say what position the Church of England should take in future about issues of human sexual identity and behaviour, nor do they contain any proposals for future action by the Church of England on these issues.

At the time of writing (May 2022) the time set aside for engagement with the LLF resources in the dioceses, deaneries and parishes has come to end.

What will now happen in what is known as the ‘Next Steps’ process is as follows.

- **July 2022** General Synod will engage with LLF in small groups with ‘creative and reflective elements.’
- **September 2022** Two resources will be published in a variety of media.
 - ‘*Listening to the whole Church,*’ an analysis of the results of the LLF consultation.
 - ‘*The Gift of the Church,*’ an ecclesiological statement produced by the Church of England’s Faith and Order Commission.
- **September 2022** The College of Bishops will begin a process of discernment in the light of the LLF Book and the findings of ‘Listening to the Whole Church’ and ‘The Gift of the Church’.
- **October 2022** The College of Bishops will work on proposals for a way forward, indicating the implications for formal decision-making by the Church of England.
- **December 2022** The College and House of Bishops will finalise proposals and reflect on what is needed to support the decision-making processes in General Synod.
- **February 2023** General Synod will consider proposals from the College and House of Bishops and agree a clear direction of travel.

What the bishops will propose, how General Synod will respond, and what will happen after that are unknown. What is clear, however, is that there will continue to be pressure for the Church of England to follow the same direction of travel as the Church in Wales by permitting the blessing of same-sex relationships and then eventually permitting same-sex marriages. In addition, there will be continuing

pressure to change the discipline set out in *Issues in Human Sexuality* by rescinding the requirement that clergy should not be in sexually active same-sex relationships.

There are also two further developments that need to be noted.

The first is that none of the proposals for the future of the United Methodist Church set out in Appendix 3.2 of *Visibly Different* were adopted by the UMC which has instead proposed a ‘*Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace through Separation*’ under which the UMC as a whole would be free to permit same sex marriages, but conservative churches and ministers would be allowed to retain their churches and pension rights if they left the UMC as a result. This proposal is due to be voted on at the UMC conference in August 2022, but a growing number of conservative churches have already left the UMC without waiting for the result of this vote and a new conservative Global Methodist Church was launched on 1 May 2022.¹

The second is the proposed introduction by the United Kingdom government of a bill to ban conversion therapy as asked for in the 2017 General Synod vote mentioned in paragraph 3.1.35 of *Visibly Different*. In the Queen’s Speech on 11 May 2021 the government declared that it would introduce such a ban, but it then went on to announce a consultation to ensure that a ban would not have ‘*unintended consequences,*’ and that medical professionals, religious leaders, teachers and parents can keep having ‘*open and honest conversations.*’² Following this consultation and a double U turn on 31 March 2022 the government reiterated that it would introduce a bill to ban conversion therapy in the case of everyone under 18 and those over 18 who did not give their free consent to it, but that the ban would apply only in relation to sexual orientation and not to issues of gender identity. The government duly included a proposal for such a bill in the Queen’s Speech on 11 May 2022.

We do not know what the details of the bill will look like and what effect they would have on Christian ministry and the free exercise of the Christian faith in general. In a letter to the Evangelical Alliance on 27 March 2021 the Prime Minister wrote:

*I do, however want to reassure you that I take freedom of speech and freedom of religion very seriously. As the Government made clear in 2018, when we first made our commitment to end conversion therapy, we will continue to allow adults to receive appropriate pastoral care (including prayer), in churches and other regions settings, in the exploration of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Like you, I do not want to see clergy and church members criminalised for normal non coercive activity.*³

What is unclear is to what extent any future legislation will honour this commitment.⁴

¹ ‘Why Congregations Aren’t Waiting to Leave the United Methodist Church,’ Christian Today 16 July 2021 at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/july/umc-leave-church-methodist-split-lgbt-conference-protocol.html>. and ‘Global Methodist Church’ at <https://globalmethodist.org/>.

² BBC News, ‘What is conversion therapy and when will it be banned?’ 11 May 2021 at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/explainers-56496423>.

³ Letter from Mr Boris Johnson to Mr Peter Lynas, 27 March 2021 at <https://www.eauk.org/assets/files/downloads/Boris-Johnson-letter-of-response.pdf>

⁴ For information on the this issue see the Christian Institute’s Let Us Pray website at <https://letuspray.uk/>.

However, the most important thing to note is that nothing that has happened since 2020 has fundamentally altered the situation described in *Visibly Different* and that the case it makes for visible differentiation therefore still remains valid.

Grant, we pray, almighty God, that as we believe your only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into the heavens, so we in heart and mind may also ascend and with him continually dwell; who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

Stephen Hofmeyr, Chair of the working party

Martin Davie, Theological Consultant and member of the working party.

Ascension Day 2022