

GENERAL SYNOD

WELCOMING TRANSGENDER PEOPLE

A background note from the Secretary General

1. The wording of the Diocesan Synod Motion calls on the House of Bishops “to consider whether some nationally commended liturgical materials might be prepared to mark a person’s gender transition.” The aim of the motion, as set out in the diocese’s supporting paper is to call on the Church “to provide a pastoral response to the need of transgender people to be affirmed following their long and often complex process of gender transition.”

Background

2. As GS 2071A explains, the origin of the motion comes from an approach made to the incumbent of Lancaster Priory from a young transgender person “seeking to be “re-baptised” in his new identity”.¹ The incumbent later explained his position to the *Guardian*, saying:

“It’s an absolute trauma to go through this, with the surgery, as people get a lot of transphobic bullying. The church needs to take a lead and be much more proactive to make sure they are given a warm welcome.... I wanted to bring it to the General Synod as a commitment that bishops will take seriously, and for them to take the next step of getting a liturgy which parish priests can use for people who do the transition where they can be affirmed in the church.”

3. The clergyperson confirmed that the service he eventually agreed to carry out with his parishioner was not a ‘re-baptism’ but

‘an affirmation of baptismal vows where we could introduce him to God with his new name and his new identity.’

4. The parishioner and other transgender people interviewed for the article went on to say that they found services which affirmed their new gender identity to be very positive experiences. However, concern was raised by other Anglicans who were interviewed for the article who argued that the proposal to introduce a new liturgy would go against traditional Biblical teaching.

Theological and Ethical Considerations

5. From a theological perspective, the central anthropological reality is that human persons are made in the image of God (Genesis 1.26, 27). The image of God is not something that human beings possess; it is something that defines what they are. The image of God transcends race, gender and any other qualifying aspects of being human that may be considered; all human persons are made in God’s image and nothing can alter this core element of what it means to be human.
6. The Scriptures speak of God creating human beings as ‘male’ and ‘female’ (Genesis 1.27). The biological distinctions between the sexes are generally viewed as being self-evident². Social constructs of masculinity and femininity vary to a degree within the biblical record, but are not a focus of specific attention. Paul’s statement that ‘in Christ’, there ‘is no male or female’ (Galatians 3.28) emphasises

¹ See “Church of England to consider transgender naming Ceremony”, *Guardian*, 21 May 2015 <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/may/21/proposal-for-transgender-baptism-to-go-before-church-of-england>

² Current research analysis suggests that 1.7% of people are biologically ambiguous with regard to their sex, the ambiguity being identified at the level of chromosomes, genes, anatomy, physiology or sexual development.

the essential unity that all Christians enjoy, based on their common identity as followers of Jesus, rather than serving as a piece of anthropological or social commentary.

7. Jesus' puzzling comment in Matthew 19.12 about eunuchs ³, is the closest the Scriptures come to acknowledging the notion that being male or female may not always be as straightforward a matter as may be assumed. Jesus' comment is, however, set in the context of a discussion on marriage and divorce and is not primarily about gender issues.
8. In recent years, gender dysphoria has come to be defined as a condition where a person experiences discomfort or distress because there is a mismatch between their biological sex and gender identity. There are those who believe that they require to have their gender 're-aligned' (or 're-assigned') in order to become a more fully integrated person and to address what they perceive as an incompatibility between their sex and gender. Parliament legislated in 2004 to make it possible for persons who have been diagnosed with gender dysphoria and have been living in the 'acquired gender' for two years to be recognised in law as being of their newly acquired gender.

The Church's position

9. There is no single settled view from the Church of England on the doctrinal position regarding transgenderism. The House of Bishops stated in 2003⁴:

The House recognised that there was a range of views within the Church on transsexualism and accepted that (as matters stood at present) both the positions set out below could properly be held:

a) some Christians concluded on the basis of Scripture and Christian anthropology, that concepts such as 'gender realignment' or 'sex change' were really a fiction. Hormone treatment or surgery might change physical appearance, but they could not change the fundamental God-given reality of 'male and female He created them'.

b) others, by contrast, whilst recognising that medical opinion was not unanimous, were persuaded that there were individuals whose conviction that they were 'trapped in the wrong body' was so profound and persistent that medical intervention, which might include psychiatric, hormone, and surgical elements, was legitimate and that the result could properly be termed a change of sex or gender.

10. It is a fundamental belief of the Church that baptism can only be received once. There is therefore no possibility of the Synod approving a form of service for the re-baptism of transgendered persons in their new gender who have already been baptised. Nor could material to that end be commended for use by clergy in exercise of their discretion under Canon B.5.2 - Canon B.5.3 since these Canons make clear that all forms of service used under that provision

"shall be neither contrary to, nor indicative of any departure from, the doctrine of the Church of England in any essential matter".

Liturgical Response

³ 'For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it'

⁴ HB(03)M1, para 7

11. The *Common Worship* library of Church of England services already includes an authorized form of service for the Affirmation of Baptismal Faith.⁵ This service refers to the fact that the individual has already been baptised, asks them to repeat their baptismal vows and re-affirm their faith. The focal point of this service is on the individual's faith in Jesus Christ, rather than on the individual's name or gender – regardless of whether or not it was different from when they were baptised.
12. This service is sometimes used in a context where a person has been through a significant personal transition of one kind or another and now wishes to re-affirm their identity in Christ and their place within the life of the church as rooted in their original baptism, and to mark that publicly. It is therefore already available for use in the context of gender transition, as indeed in the Lancaster example mentioned in paragraphs 2-4 above. The notes of guidance for the Affirmation of Baptismal Faith make clear that the service is 'intended for those who are already baptized and confirmed and who, after preparation and instruction, come to make a public act of commitment.' The Commentary by the Liturgical Commission observes that affirmations of faith allow

*God's grace to be acknowledged before the Church. The form prescribed gives opportunity for this to take place in public worship and relates the person's new commitment to the grace of God pledged to them in their past baptism [...] This provision responds to requests for more vivid recognition of post-baptismal experiences of personal renewal and commitment [...] without giving any appearance of a second baptism.*⁶
13. The Church of England does not currently offer any liturgical provision for the 'naming' or 're-naming' of an infant or any other person. There is no legal or doctrinal difficulty about a baptised transgendered person re-affirming their baptismal vows using a name different from the Christian name given at baptism. This is because whilst the Christian name given at baptism can only be changed formally in very limited circumstances – notably by the Bishop confirming the person concerned under a new name – a member of the Church of England may be known by, and use, different names from those given at baptism or confirmation provided that they do not do so for fraudulent or other similar purposes.⁷
14. If the Synod passed the Diocesan Synod Motion as drafted, the House of Bishops would need to consider whether some additional liturgical materials should be prepared to supplement what is already provided for in *Common Worship*. One way of achieving that could be by the House commending prayers and other suitable material for use by the clergy in the exercise of their discretion under Canon B 5 – an approach which would not involve any formal process beyond a decision being taken by the House. Alternatively the House might conclude that existing liturgical materials provided sufficient flexibility to meet this pastoral need, as in paragraph 12 above.

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⁵ See <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/41166/ciritesofaff.pdf>

⁶ Commentary by the Liturgical Commission, *Common Worship: Initiation Services*, pp.349-50.

⁷ *Legal Opinions concerning the Church of England* (8th edition, 2007), page 332.