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NEWS FOCUS

Mission targets C of E barriers to gay clergy

Same - sex marriage in churches, and full access to all three Holy Orders for those in such marriages, are among the goals of a new mission calling for “the full acceptance and affirmation of LGBTI people” in the Church of England, Madeline Davies writes in the Church Times

The LGBTI Mission, launched on Thursday, February 4, 2016, has put together a programme of goals that it would like to achieve “over the next five years and beyond”. It includes demands for action from the hierarchy, alongside plans to press ahead independently, including the publication of liturgy to celebrate same-sex marriage.

A booklet outlining the programme, published yesterday, lists examples of “discrimination” and “injustice” faced by LGBTI people, and warns of a culture of “collusion and silence” in the Church. Some young LGBTI people do not feel “safe and welcomed”, it says.

One of its goals is legislation in the General Synod to reverse the current block on same-sex marriage in church.

The LGBTI Mission programme has three strands: Living, Loving, and Serving. The third focuses on bars to ordination, appointment, and preferment. The group plans to campaign to end “all diocesan policies that discriminate against LGBTI ordinands”, including the bar to consideration for ordination for gay or lesbian people in same-sex marriages.

It has anecdotal evidence that some diocesan bishops refuse to allow any LGBTI person to appear before a Bishops’ Advisory Panel, and is planning to collect information on this to discuss with the dioceses concerned. It is calling on the House of Bishops to remove assent to *Issues in Human Sexuality* — which states that homosexual priests must be celibate — as a pre-condition to selection for training.

Also sought is a statement from the House of Bishops that “marital status is not a bar to appointments”; and approval, by the General Synod, of a policy that “all appointments should be made without discrimination as to marital status, sexual orientation, or gender identity, except to accommodate the local theological convictions of parishes and clergy”.

It will also “raise concerns in Westminster” about current exemptions to equality legislation.

Tracey Byrne, the chief executive of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, which is part of the mission, said this week that people were reporting to her that “things have got worse, not better” in recent years.

“The fog of ‘Don’t ask, don’t tell’ is definitely clearing, and things are worse in many ways,” she said on Monday. “Perhaps that makes it easier, because we are clearer now about where we stand. We are clear about what the Church can legally do. . . Outside the Church, [people] are horrified when I say that the Church can do this.”

The first strand of the programme — “Living” — includes a focus on the experience of young LGBTI people, many of whom “do not receive the signals that they are safe and welcomed in

their Christian faith community”. In 2014, the Archbishop of Canterbury launched an anti-homophobic bullying guide for C of E schools and promised “zero tolerance” ([News, 9 May, 2014](#)).

The second strand of the programme — “Loving” — sets out plans to produce and publish liturgies and seek commendation for them from the House of Bishops. This will include texts for use in church after civil partnerships and same-sex marriages. It is calling for clergy and parishes to be able to celebrate same-sex marriages “in line with their own theological perspective”, and plans to ensure that suitable recommendations are made to General Synod.

The latest poll on attitudes to same-sex marriage was commissioned by Jayne Ozanne, a General Synod member. Of the 6276 British adults who responded, 1523 live in England and have a C of E, Anglican, or Episcopalian affiliation. Of these, 45 per cent approved of same-sex marriage, compared with 38 per cent when the same question was posed in 2013.

The Vicar of St John’s, Waterloo, Canon Giles Goddard, a member of the Synod, and part of the Mission, said on Tuesday that it would be

“hard to read the mood of Synod” until after the Shared Conversations.

One of the first acts of the Mission will be to produce a “clear statement on the full spectrum of human sexuality and gender variance, and the precious gift of sex and marriage in Christian understanding”. Developed by a theological resource group, largely comprising academics at Cambridge University, it will be distributed before the members of the General Synod embark on Shared Conversations, in July. The Mission says that, while the Church accepts a range of views on other issues, including women’s ordination, “there is no space for differences when it comes to human sexuality and gender identity. The official and only acceptable view is that marriage is only possible between a man and a woman.”

On Wednesday, the Bishop of Norwich, the Rt Revd Graham James, said: "It is not only expected but welcome that various groups and individuals across the Church will present their views, and inevitably this will represent the diversity of opinion held. Given what many have experienced and learnt through the Shared Conversations, it is hoped that these are expressed and responded to with clarity and respect, holding our differences and

disagreement within the love and grace of Christ."

LGBTI Mission hopes to see more bishops speak openly about their own views. Currently, only two bishops have spoken out in support of gay marriage: the Bishop of Salisbury, the Rt Revd Nicholas Holtam, and the Bishop of Buckingham, Dr Alan Wilson.

Last week, Dr Wilson, part of LGBTI Mission, said that, while he refused to judge any of his colleagues, he expected this to change.

"Just clamming up and saying nothing is ceasing to be an option," he said. "A situation where everyone knows the real score but a small number of people at the top is pretending something else is really damaging to the Church."

Given that "hundreds and thousands" of people in the UK might be in gay marriages within the next decade, he said that the need for liturgies that priests could use was "urgent".

"Right now we are very good at telling people what not to do," he said. "You must not call it a blessing but can call it a service of thanksgiving, dedication and commitment. We are not very good at telling people what they can do." He

expressed concern about what would fill this “vacuum”.

LGBTI Mission’s programme had “no intention to put the squeeze on people not ready to expand their sense of what marriage is,” he said. “What we do want is for there to be the same respect all round for the consciences of everybody, and right now there isn’t.”

<http://lgbtmission.org.uk/>

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