



Bishop David Gillett ministered in Down and Dromore diocese

NEWS FOCUS -

Irish links of retired evangelical bishops who are challenging C of E bishops on LGBT inclusion

Two of the fourteen retired C of E bishops who wrote last week to the serving C of E bishops regarding their General Synod paper on LGBT inclusion have links with Ireland.

They are Bishop Roy Williamson who was born in Belfast, and Bishop David Gillett who ministered in Down and Dromore diocese, writes Houston McKelvey.

Bishop Williamson was Bishop of Bradford from 1984 until 1991 when he was translated to Southwark where he served until his retirement seven years later.

From 1999 to 2008, Bishop Gillett was the Bishop of Bolton, a suffragan bishop in the Diocese of Manchester. Since 2008, he has been an honorary assistant bishop and Diocesan Interfaith Adviser in the Diocese of Norwich.

Both have Evangelical credentials.

Williamson prepared for ministry at Oak Hill Theological College.

Gillett was Principal of Trinity College, Bristol, from 1988 to 1999. From 1971 he was Northern Travelling Secretary of Pathfinders and the

Church Youth Fellowships Association *CYFA*, an organization that supports Christian teenagers. After a spell as Lecturer and first Director of Extension Studies at St. John's College, Nottingham, he became one of the leaders with Canon Cecil Kerr, at the Christian Renewal Centre in Northern Ireland working for reconciliation in Northern Ireland at the height of the troubles in the late 1970s and early '80s.

Gillett belongs to the Open Evangelical tradition of the Church of England. He is a patron of Accepting Evangelicals, a group that champions an "acceptance of faithful, loving same-sex partnerships at every level of church life, and the development of a positive Christian ethic for LGBT people".

Bishop Williamson faced protests after indicating in a Radio 4 interview that he would consider ordaining gay priests who were in a stable relationships (Church Times - News, 24 March, 1995).

Another signatory, Bishop Michael Doe, was a well known visitor to the Church of Ireland during the period from 2004 to 2011 when he served as the General Secretary of the Anglican mission agency USPG - United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. He preached in many

C of I cathedrals and churches. On retirement in 2011 he became Preacher to Gray's Inn, one of the four Inns of Court in London. He is an Assistant Bishop in the Diocese of Southwark, and chaired the Ecumenical Council for Corporate Responsibility from 2012 to 2015. His publications include "Seeking the Truth in Love - the Church and Homosexuality" (DLT 2000), "Today!" (USPG 2009), and "Saving Power - the Mission of God and the Anglican Communion" (SPCK 2011).

An unprecedented move

In an unprecedented move, the fourteen retired bishops expressed their opposition to the House of Bishops' report to General Synod on sexuality, which recommends no change to the Church's canons or practises around sexuality.

Although the serving bishops said their report represented a consensus rather than a unanimous view, Bishop Peter Selby, speaking on behalf of the retired bishops, said it was "regrettable that what's come out is a kind of compromised document, with no indication that there was a struggle and there are alternative views I know there is very, very strong pressure to limit the damage that a conflict can cause."

He added: “We felt we needed to say something, so that’s what we’ve done. I’ve no doubt I’ll get some flak, both from people who disagree and from people who think I shouldn’t open my mouth.”

While upholding a traditional definition of marriage, the house of bishops’ report said church law and guidance should be interpreted with “maximum freedom” without indicating what might be permitted. Conservatives in the church have welcomed the restatement of traditional doctrine but some have warned the report could lead to “theological incoherence”.

The Church of England said: “The purpose of the shared conversations process was not to change the view of participants or to seek to change the views of others, but rather to recognise Jesus in the face, story and view of those with whom they might disagree.

“There are no formal proposals being debated at general synod. The ‘take note’ debate will be an opportunity for those with differing opinions on this issue to have their views aired.”

Since “shared conversations” on sexuality ended last July, the House of Bishops has met four times to discuss the next steps. In a bid to avoid

a split, the synod will not be asked to accept its report but merely “take note” of it.

This procedure is usually a formality, but campaigners are fomenting a challenge. They plan to demand separate votes on the “take note” motion in each section of the synod: bishops, clergy and laity. A rejection by one section – most likely the clergy – would mean the motion would be lost, in what would be an extraordinary rebuff to the bishops.

Campaigners have ready an alternative motion demanding that a “set of forward-looking proposals on same-sex relationships” be tabled next year. If there were “a strong negative current” against the report, the bishops would be forced to think again, said Dr Selby.

Previous stances on sexuality reveals historic support of LGBT groups and legislative change

The Church Times reported online yesterday (February 13) that a study of the signatories’ previous stances on sexuality reveals historic support of LGBT groups and legislative change, and also changes in their own thinking over the years, together with the extent to which

articulating a minority view can result in conflict within dioceses.

The aforementioned Dr Peter Selby is among the long-time proponents of change. Selby, a former Bishop of Worcester, once likened the Lambeth Conference debate on human sexuality to a Nüremberg rally (CT News, 12 February, 1999).

His support for LGBT people resulted in some petitioning for alternative oversight (CT News, 12 November, 1999). Another signatory, the Rt Revd Martin Wharton, also faced a call for alternative oversight during his tenure as Bishop of Newcastle (CT News, 19 June, 1998).

The Rt Revd John Gladwin, another signatory, was a patron of Changing Attitude while Bishop of Chelmsford. He was lead bishop in the House of Lords during the debate on civil partnerships, during which he opposed an amendment, regarded by some as a wrecking one, that would have extended civil partnerships to family members. (It was supported by six bishops.) “It is important that we as Christians do not go around talking of civil partners as if they were married,” he told the Synod, in 2007.

Lord Harries, a former Bishop of Oxford and another signatory, has called on the Church to welcome same-sex marriage. He welcomed the

Civil Partnerships Bill in 2004 and voted in favour of allowing ceremonies enabling them to take place in religious premises (CT [News, 26 February, 2010](#)). He also supported the repeal of Section 28 (CT News, 28 January, 2000) and legislation enabling gay couples to adopt (CT 8 November, 2002).

He was a member of the working party who helped to produce *Issues in Human Sexuality*, the guidance published in 1991 (CT News, 6 December, 1991), described in the Bishops' report as in need of updating. In 1997, he articulated a more conservative view to the Synod than that he currently holds, arguing that he could not commend "as God's purpose" the decision to be in a "loving and faithful homophile partnership". Gay clergy could not "claim liberty of conscientious dissent, like the laity", he said (18 July, 1997).

His successor in Oxford, the Rt Revd John Pritchard, apologised in the wake of the Bishops pastoral statement in 2014, saying that its tone "had the awkward sound of scratching a blackboard" (CT [News, 28 March, 2014](#)) and promising that there would be no "witch hunt" in his diocese.

Evangelicals are included among the signatories, including the Rt Revd David Gillett, a former Bishop of Bolton, who trained at Oak Hill, and the Rt Revd Roy Williamson, a former Bishop of Southwark, who faced protests after indicating in a Radio 4 interview that he would consider ordaining gay priests who were in a stable relationships (News, 24 March, 1995).

Another signatory, the Rt Revd Tim Stevens, a former Bishop of Leicester, was the Bishops' convenor in the House of Lords during the debate on the Same-Sex Marriage Bill, voicing the Bishops' opposition ([News, 1 February, 2013](#)). He also moved an amendment to the Bill to prevent the forcing of local authority registrars to officiate at same-sex marriages ([News, 21 June, 2013](#)). He hinted at the time that "some of us . . . would be more sympathetic to the Church providing ways in which for Christian gay people their partnerships could be recognised and prayed for" ([News, 15 June, 2012](#)).

Additional signatories

Since publication of the letter, another five retired bishops have signed the letter, and one serving bishop, the Bishop of Buckingham, Dr Alan Wilson. They include Dr John Saxbee a former

Bishop of the diocese of Lincoln, where prayers for thanksgiving for loving relationships were made available in 2005 (News, 7 January, 2005).

Not all bishops who have spoken out about changing their mind on this issue have added their names. The Rt Revd James Jones, a former Bishop of Liverpool, wrote in 1998 of how reading of the love between David and Jonathan had led to a change in his view. He also apologised to the Dean of St Albans, Dr Jeffrey John, whose appointment as the Bishop of Reading he had opposed ([News, 8 February, 2008](#)).

The Letter

February 10th 2017

Dear Fellow Bishop

The Bishops' Report to Synod on Sexuality

Most retired bishops would be prepared to admit that participation in the synodical processes of the church is not what they most miss about their role as diocesan or suffragan bishops. They also feel some reticence about entering into the current debates occupying their successors on

the basis of information that is partial and becomes more and more dated with the passing of the years. There is a dilemma, though: you don't work for years as a bishop and then easily and suddenly lose the bond you feel for the bishops, your successors and former colleagues. Nor do you lose your concern that the church of which you continue to be a bishop should be faithful in its commendation of the Gospel to the society at large.

So when a report emerges that is the subject of major controversy within the church and society some retired bishops will wish to do what the signatories of this letter are seeking to do, namely to reflect from their particular perspective on what our successors are seeking to say and do about an issue that has been a longstanding source of concern and contention.

Your statement is the product of enormous time and effort, our memories of such situations suggesting perhaps too much time and too much effort. The 'too much' comes from the enormous sense of responsibility your document shows to manage a conflict that you and we know causes huge amounts of grief and argument. The result, dare we say, is that whereas it used to be said that bishops often sounded as though they spoke with a pipe in

their mouths, now that pipes are rare they sound more as though they see their task as *managing* – rather than perhaps *enabling* or *leading* – the conflicts that are bound to occur. And we remember how exhausting that is, and how it seems to blunt the edge of bishops' own passionate convictions, which might divide them but also invigorate the conversation.

You write after the Shared Conversations. We well remember having had lots of those, even if they did not have capital letters. But their integrity rested on the assurance that in reporting them the voices of those who participated would not be drowned out by the 'majority view' or 'established position'. Our perception is that while the pain of LGBT people is spoken *about* in your report, we do not hear its authentic voice. Our experience would lead us to doubt whether there was an expectation around that canons and doctrinal statements would be changed within any reasonable timescale, and that focus seems to have taken far more time than it would have done if the authentic voices of lesbian and gay people had been allowed to express the major focus of their hopes. Going down the road of seeking a change in the law or doctrinal formulation would indeed not have been realistic – but you might not have had to spend as much time explaining

why if those other voices had been allowed to come through more clearly.

The result of that focus on the issue of a change in the *law* is that your call for change of *tone and culture*, while absolutely right, does not carry conviction. Indeed, from the perhaps luxurious perspective of retirement the tone and culture of your document are incredibly familiar – we’ve been there and talked in that tone of voice, and it prevents calls for a change of culture, of course offered in complete sincerity by you, from ringing true.

We’ll avoid making too many detailed points just now; but hard as you have tried you have really not allowed the *theological* voice of some of us to be heard properly. In para 8 you draw a contrast between ‘the many who [hold] a conservative view of scripture [for whom] the underlying issue at stake is faithfulness to God’s word’ and others for whom ‘the imperative to read scripture differently stems from a parallel conviction’. If the second group are to recognise their voice in theological conversations their ‘parallel conviction’ needs to be expressed and not just alluded to.

May we end by assuring you that we continue to sympathise with the challenging nature of the

task you have in this and other matters. You will receive much negative comment about your report, and we hope that these brief remarks may illuminate the reason for that: it is not that the Shared Conversations were thought to herald changes of law or doctrine; rather there will be deep disappointment that those who are not officially part of your meetings, who experience at first hand the struggles you only allude to, have once again been *spoken about* by their bishops instead of being enabled to *speak in their own voice* about their future and the future of the church they belong to and care about.

Yours sincerely in Christ

The Rt Revd Dr David Atkinson, formerly Bishop of Thetford

The Rt Revd Michael Doe, formerly Bishop of Swindon

The Rt Revd Dr Timothy Ellis, formerly Bishop of Grantham

The Rt Revd David Gillett, formerly Bishop of Bolton

The Rt Revd John Gladwin, formerly Bishop of Guildford and of Chelmsford

The Rt Revd Dr Laurie Green, formerly Bishop of Bradwell

The Rt Revd the Lord Harries, formerly Bishop of Oxford

The Rt Revd Stephen Lowe, formerly Bishop of Hulme

The Rt Revd Dr Stephen Platten, formerly Bishop of Wakefield

The Rt Revd John Pritchard, formerly Bishop of Oxford

The Rt Revd Dr Peter Selby, formerly Bishop of Worcester

The Rt Revd Tim Stevens, formerly Bishop of Leicester

The Rt Revd Roy Williamson, formerly Bishop of Bradford and of Southwark

The Rt Revd Martin Wharton CBE, formerly Bishop of Newcastle

The Synod debate tomorrow

The Church of England synod, the governing body of bishops, clergy and laity which decides

Church policy, will vote tomorrow (Wednesday February 15) whether to confirm or reject the report by the bishops which supports maintaining the Church's position opposing gay marriage.

Liberals in the synod have welcomed the chance to vote against the same-sex marriage ban, and Church liberals generally hope the synod will reject the bishops' advice.

A vote by the synod in favour of same-sex marriage could pave the way for a fundamental change in C of E teaching and lead to gay and lesbian couples being allowed to marry in C of E churches.

Simon Sarmiento, chairman of the church's LGBT Mission group, said: "We would be pleased if the synod decided not to 'take note' of the Bishops' report. It should make the bishops realise that what they've produced so far really is not satisfactory and it will give an impetus for a re-think on gay marriage."

Despite the report reaffirming that marriage is between a man and a woman, some in the Church's conservative wing fear it does not send a clear enough message against gay marriage.

Susie Leafe, a synod member and director of conservative Anglican group Reform, said:
“Without a clear commitment to that I can see them having problems getting it through. The main problem is that there are people from all sides of the debate who for very different reasons think the content of the report is deplorable.”

Guidance from the House of Bishops in 2014 said getting married to someone of the same sex would “clearly be at variance with the teaching of the Church of England”.

Last year, 14 clergy in same-sex marriages called on bishops to include gay people in the life of the Church.

Houston McKelvey, 13 February 2017

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