

## **ANGLICAN MAINSTREAM LETTER TO THE HOUSE OF BISHOPS**

### **To the House of Bishops of the Church of England**

**September 16 2005**

**Dear Bishops,**

We write in response to your pastoral statement of July 25 2005.

We acknowledge the considerable complexities you have faced in responding to the passage of the Civil Partnership Act. Yet we are concerned at your response to the ambiguity in the Civil Partnership Act.

While individuals are free under civil law to register partnerships, given the ambiguity in the legislation and because they are bound to be seen as a form of gay “marriage”, it would be inadvisable for Christians to enter them if only to avoid causing scandal. We acknowledge the need to remove unjust discrimination in our social legislation but it is necessary to recognise that sexual expression of the relationship in a registered Civil Partnership has been explicitly acknowledged by the government. For example refusal of sexual intimacy is a possible ground for dissolution of the partnership. It is naïve to think that a significant number of those embarking upon a civil partnership will eschew sexual intimacy, as hoped for by the bishops. This reality will in due course bring your advice into disrepute. In these circumstances, we believe that it would be better for you to advise all Christians, whether lay or ordained, not to enter civil partnerships, rather than entering them under restricted conditions.

Our thinking in this is guided by our expectation that as our bishops and teachers you will publicly, courageously and consistently hold out to society the teaching of the Bible and the Church and the implications of it for holiness of life. For these reasons, we look to you as leaders of our church strongly to discourage Christians from registering Civil Partnerships, and to exercise appropriate discipline with regard to the clergy. Merely to require of those clergy registering that they refrain from sexual expression may lead to hypocrisy by encouraging some clergy not to tell and some bishops not to ask. We remain unconvinced that monitoring and ensuring conformity to this standard is realistic and would like to know how the refusal to give assurances in this matter will be dealt with.

Furthermore, the statement goes beyond your report “Issues in Human Sexuality” in its treatment of the laity. Most have taken the assertion in “Issues” that the church does not reject homophile people to mean they are welcomed in worship and to hear the word of God. This welcome does not exclude the possibility of appropriate pastoral care or the exercise of compassionate discipline, in this as in other areas of life, in order to bring people to repentance and new life in Christ.

It is inconsistent to maintain that, while “the same standards apply to all” (¶23), no discipline should be applied to those who come (or bring infants) to baptism, confirmation or communion when these services call for an explicit public statement

of repentance and commitment “to live a new life”. We also note with concern that you have given no guidance for lay officers in the church such as readers, churchwardens, youth leaders, Sunday School teachers, Deanery lay chairs, chairs of houses of laity and others who carry considerable responsibility for doctrinal and pastoral practice.

In summary we are seriously concerned that:

- by stating that “lay people who have registered civil partnerships ought not to be asked to give assurances about the nature of their relationship before being admitted to baptism, confirmation and communion”, you appear to have abandoned the resolution of November 1987 General Synod “that homosexual genital acts also fall short of this ideal, and are likewise to be met with a call to repentance and the exercise of compassion”;
- by agreeing to incorporate into church law by government statute the ambiguous term ‘civil partner’ wherever the term ‘spouse’ occurs, church law is about to be changed without a single discussion by General Synod or the dioceses or parishes of the church;
- by affirming the Bible and the Church’s teaching on marriage, but proposing not to discourage Christian people from registering civil partnerships (which, despite clearly stated assertions to the contrary, are in effect being treated by the government and society as on a par with marriage), there is significant danger that our nation will be misled rather than clearly guided concerning the will of God for societal and relational health and wellbeing and
- by adopting the stance taken in your 25<sup>th</sup> July statement there is a serious risk of further impairing the unity of the Church of England and the Anglican Communion, already torn by recent events in North America.

*We therefore urge you to reconsider and revise your pastoral advice in order that the church may be seen to act on its declared beliefs and thus give a clear and unambiguous message in the light of the present confusion surrounding civil partnerships.*

In order to uphold the authority of the traditional, historic and universal understanding of the Bible’s place in defining pastoral practice in human relationships, we will:

- encourage clergy and lay ministers, in their teaching, preparation and presentation for baptism, confirmation and communion, to place the demands of the gospel before people living in active same sex relationships by calling for repentance and commitment to live a new life, and
- support bishops who, in line with the Church’s canons, exercise godly discipline in this area with regard to their clergy.

We continue in prayer for you, in the demanding role God has given you, and plead with you to speak biblically and boldly at a time when our society urgently needs to know the true guidance of God.

Signed

**Bishop Wallace Benn**, Bishop of Lewes, President, Church of England Evangelical Council

**Rev David Banting**, Vicar of St Peter's Harold Wood (Chelmsford) and National Chair of Reform

**Prebendary Richard Bewes OBE**, formerly Rector of All Souls Langham Place (London)

**Rev John Coles**, Director, New Wine Network

**Rev George Curry**, Vicar of St Paul's and St Stephen's Churches, Newcastle and Chairman of Church Society

**Rev Alyson Davie**, Priest in Charge, The Mundens with Sacombe (St Albans)

**The Ven Dr Paul Gardner**, Archdeacon of Exeter and Chair of CEEC.

**Dr Philip Giddings**, Convenor of Anglican Mainstream UK

**Rev Elisabeth Goddard**, Assistant Minister (NSM) St Andrew's, North Oxford

**Rev David McCarthy**, Rector, St Silas, Glasgow, Secretary, Scottish Anglican Network

**Canon Dr Chris Sugden**, Executive Secretary Anglican Mainstream International

**Rev Nicholas Wynne-Jones**, Area Dean of Beckenham, Secretary of Church of England Evangelical Council

**On behalf of Anglican Mainstream UK.**

For further information please contact:

**Dr Philip Giddings**, Convenor of Anglican Mainstream UK 0118-931 8207 / 0118 954 3892

**Canon Dr Chris Sugden**, Executive Secretary Anglican Mainstream International 01865 -883388 [csugden@anglican-mainstream.net](mailto:csugden@anglican-mainstream.net)

**Signed**

<b>NAME (Please Print)</b>	<b>Parish</b>	<b>Diocese</b>	<b>Signature and Post if any Church Warden, Treasurer, PCC Sec, Area Synod member, Youth Leader, Lay Reader.</b>

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