

Report from Changing Attitude talk by Bishop Tom Butler

15 June 2011, St Martin-in-the-Fields Church, London

I attended a discussion organised by Changing Attitude, which “works for the full inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people in the life of the Anglican Communion”
<http://changingattitude.org.uk>

Bishop Tom Butler, retired Bishop of Southwark, addressed the topic “How can we achieve a fully inclusive Church of England through its structures and processes?”

Bishop Tom said that any change in the CofE required changing the minds of bishops, clergy and laity. The House of Bishops had particular responsibility for doctrinal matters, but persuading the bishops was not enough, because once a motion got to the General Synod it could be voted down by either the clergy or the laity. He recommended as a first step, in order to get a change through the House of Bishops, a campaigning group should try to nurture a group of 8 or so diocesan bishops, who could support each other and present a common line for change within the House of Bishops.

Bishop Tom suggested that time was on the side of members of Changing Attitude in what they were seeking to achieve:

- When he was ordained 40 years ago he had not been allowed to pray the Lord’s Prayer with a Roman Catholic priest. That had now completely changed.
- When he became Bishop of Leicester 20 years ago, he had to write to clergy, who were conducting weddings in Church of those who had been previously married, telling them not to do so. That had now completely changed.
- When he became Bishop of Southwark 10 years ago someone who had been previously divorced could not become a priest. Today they can become both a priest and a bishop.

The Church had changed on these issues largely because society had changed, and society was rapidly changing their views on homosexuality and civil partnerships. The Church of England is the established Church and represents the timeless truths of the faith, but needs to do so in a way that makes sense to the mind set of the British people.

He said that the Bible doesn’t say much about homosexuality – it is not a big issue in the Bible – but what it does say is, on the face of it, hostile. A particular difficulty was that many evangelical Christians had turned the issue of another Christian’s view of homosexuality into a test of whether or not that person was loyal to the Bible. This was unfair. He suggested that those seeking change should argue the biblical case for same-sex partnerships. For example, that a life-long same-sex partnership was more akin to biblical marriage than an individual who engaged in serial heterosexual marriages. This was an argument that open evangelicals might be persuadable on. However, if a line was presented to reject the Bible, it would be opposed by all evangelicals.

There was debate about the “don’t ask, don’t tell” approach of some bishops to priests who were in active same-sex relationships. Bishop Tom said that this was not ideal, but alternatives could be worse. If he was told by a priest that the priest was in a sexually active same-sex relationship and the priest then went public about it, there would be complaints against him to the Archbishop as to why he had done nothing about it. As a bishop he did not ask questions of his priests, heterosexual or homosexual, about such personal matters. However, if a priest insisted on telling him the details of their private life, he would never lie that he did not know about it. He was grateful that he had not been forced into that position.

A question was asked about the current consultation regarding whether civil partnerships should be permitted to take place in religious buildings. Bishop Tom referred to the Church of England policy against the blessing of same-sex partnerships. He spoke of one church that went as close to that line that they could without crossing it. In the context of a normal Eucharistic service, each of the two civil partners would do a reading. The prayers would include the normal general prayers, but also a prayer for the couple in their civil partnership. At the end of the Eucharist the priest would pronounce the blessing on the whole congregation. Because the blessing was on the entire congregation in the context of a Eucharist, it avoided a direct comparison with a service of blessing in Church following a civil marriage. Nevertheless, it only needed a small step for the Church to move across the line to what many were seeking.

Bishop Tom was asked what the future was for the Anglican Communion on this issue. He said that for years he had argued that the Anglican Communion should operate under a federal model, by which individual Provinces were at liberty to make changes. He expected that next year The Episcopal Church in the USA would refuse to ratify the Anglican Covenant, and that there would consequently be a fracture in the Anglican Communion, and the eventual result would be moving to a federal model. This was what he had advocated should be the case, but it looked like the Church would have to go through a lot of pain before it ended up there.

Adrian Vincent, 15 June 2011.