THE SIBYLS

Christian Spirituality Group for Transgender People

Press release in response to the Report from the House of Bishops' Working Group on Human Sexuality (the Pilling Report) from

The Sibyls: Christian Spirituality Group for Transgender People

The Sibyls welcomes the Pilling Report as a tentative first step towards equality for transgender, lesbian, bisexual and gay members of the Church of England, and affirmation of God's welcome to all. The prospect of a further two years of conversations, after so many years of the listening process, is a daunting prospect, but as an organisation we are committed to developing relationships and dialogue with those who disagree with us.

Our submission to the working party (which is appended below), commended the use of the carefully-managed group listening exercise, developed in the Sibyls' 'Gender, sexuality and spirituality' workshop, as a template for any continuing listening process in the Church of England. This workshop, which was tested on many occasions, and in different settings, has been written up in the peer-reviewed journal, *Theology & Sexuality* Vol. 16:3, 2010. Uniquely, it addresses gender identity and spirituality in addition to sexuality. In our view it is not possible to isolate issues of sexuality from issues of gender and spirituality.

We are particularly disappointed, therefore, that the Pilling Report has very little to say about transgender and transsexual people, despite our written submission, and the meetings that took place between members of the working party and Christian trans people. There is real hurt that we do not appear to have been listened to on this occasion. We note that Paragraph 38 of the report's Introduction specifically excludes transgender people from the working party's remit. It scarcely does justice to transgender issues to remove them from the discussion of human sexuality which is now urgently needed. We are troubled too that the report confines its warm welcome and affirmation to gay and lesbian people in the Church, lay and ordained, with no mention of transgender people. We will though persevere as participants in any further conversation in the hope that our particular perspective will be eventually heard.

Again, in the Introduction paragraph 38, the report refers to important pastoral and theological issues raised by transgender people's experience, and that some of these were outlined in *Some issues in human sexuality* (2003). However, since that volume was published, the Church of England has been increasingly willing to 'accommodate' trans people, both in terms of marriage following gender recognition (though the 2004 Act was problematic for those who were already married, and we asked the working party to look at that), and candidacy for ordination. Trans people are also much more likely to be welcomed by their local church than they were ten years ago. We feel confident that members of Sibyls,

and other trans Christians, will be keen to participate energetically, prayerfully and creatively in the kind of conversations that the Pilling Report recommends.

Sibyls Committee member Christina Beardsley comments: 'Trans people have been used to living on the margins of society and the Church but times are changing for the better. Church of England statements and practice in relation to transsexual people are more progressive than the Pilling Report suggests. Trans Christians are increasingly conscious that they bring special gifts to their faith community. The proposed listening process is an opportunity for those gifts to become a blessing to others.'

We are also convinced that there must be a greater openness to, and a wider understanding, of the extensive range of scientific and theological work that has been, and is currently being undertaken on transgender issues, as well as same-sex issues, in addition to those relied upon within the report. We believe that what is presented there is insufficient to provide a strong and reliable foundation for the proposed conversations.

The Sibyls is a UK-based confidential spirituality group for transgender people and their supporters, offering companionship along the journey, and information/advocacy to churches.

Sibyls seek to fulfil the two great commandments of Jesus to love God and to love one another. To this end we try to hold two retreats a year, in safe, friendly establishments, to provide an opportunity to meet, talk, learn, pray and seek God's will. We also produce a regular e-newsletter and offer a listening service for members.

http://www.sibyls.co.uk/

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Submission to the House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality

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Rationale

The Sibyls is making this submission to the House of Bishops' Working Group on Human Sexuality because Christian transgender people are often overlooked in Church discussions of sexuality, with the exception, perhaps, of Chapter 7 of the House of Bishops' guide, *Some issues in human sexuality* (2003) – though we are conscious of that chapter's limitations. Our criticisms are noted below.

At the outset it needs to be said that the terms 'transgender people', or 'trans people' refer to a wide range of people who are gender variant or atypical in their gender development. The terms include transsexual people, who may or may not have undergone gender reassignment, as well as those who vary their gender presentation by cross-dressing, or the adoption of a gender neutral appearance.

It might be argued – and some trans people would do so strongly – that being transgender is an issue of gender identity rather than sexuality. The distinction is a helpful one when trying to communicate the specifics of trans people's experience, and often overlooked when discussion is framed in general terms in phrases such as 'LGBT people'. Indeed, it is becoming more common now to use the phrase 'LGB&T people' to highlight the distinctive nature of trans people's experience.

Increasing effort is being made to ensure that trans speakers are included on panels, or as workshop leaders, at equality and diversity conferences and events, so that trans people are included in the conversation rather than being overlooked. The often made assumption that trans people have more or less the same issues as lesbian and gay people is incorrect. There is

also an increasing recognition that trans people are a 'hard to reach group', often subject to ongoing harassment and abuse because of "the pervasive hetero-normative values of British society" who are not "*defined* by their needs and difficulties. ... Each individual presents a unique and rich set of preferences, assets, skills and weaknesses" (Hopwood & Pharoah 2012: 36).

This sense of the omission of trans people from the argument – we prefer the term argument as we agree with Professor Adrian Thatcher that it is inaccurate to speak of a 'debate' [2005: 9-10] in the Anglican Communion – is deeply felt by Sibyls members and emerged very strongly in the Sibyls workshop project, 'Gender Sexuality & Spirituality' which we refer to below. In one workshop, for example, Christian trans people expressed immense frustration with the Church's obsession with sexuality when what they wanted to discuss was gender identity.

It could be argued, of course, that the Church of England and the Anglican Communion have been discussing – and sometimes debating – gender, in addition to sexuality, for decades, but framed very specifically, in the form of the appropriateness of the admission of women to the sacred ministry.

What is evident though, from the Sibyls' perspective, is that the parallel conversations about gender (the ordination of women as priests/bishops) and sexuality (usually homosexuality) are not addressing our concerns as Christian trans people and appear to militate against a more general exploration of gender and sexuality, both in terms of modern knowledge and their spiritual significance.

To sum up the rationale for this submission: while we value the distinction between gender identity and sexuality in highlighting the unique character of trans people's experience and journeys, as compared with those of lesbian and gay people, it seems obvious to us that gender – one's sense of being male or female – and sexuality – one's sense of physical, emotional and spiritual attraction to another person – although independent in origin, are inextricably linked.

Furthermore, the Sibyls workshop 'gender, sexuality and spirituality', has indicated that atypical gender behaviour (as distinct from the trans person's atypical gender identity) can be an aspect of some lesbian, gay and straight people's experience, and that trans people often have to negotiate issues of sexuality as part of their journey. It has also become increasingly clear to us, as a Christian organisation, that Church discussions of sexuality and gender have tended to neglect the spiritual dimensions of these important aspects of human experience, and hence the decision was made that our workshop project should embrace 'gender, sexuality and spirituality'.

Literature & dogma

One of our greatest concerns in relation to the Church of England's approach to trans people has been the tendency to adopt a dogmatic perspective that does not appear to be grounded in

acquaintance with current research or serious listening to the actual experience of trans people.

Oliver O'Donovan's Grove booklet, *Transsexualism & Christian Marriage* (1982) now re-named *Transsexualism: Issues and Argument* (2007), for example, seems to have had an exaggerated influence, perhaps because it was, for a long time, one of the few accessible texts on the subject. It is unclear how much, if at all, it was based on conversations with trans people, even though the author was writing at the request of a Canadian bishop who had been asked to permit the marriage of a postoperative transsexual. The descriptions of trans people's experience certainly sounds second, if not third hand, and trans narratives have become more nuanced since that time. The phrase 'trapped in the wrong body', for example, is not one that most trans people would use nowadays, but was common when O'Donovan first wrote, and led him to argue that trans people's claim to have a gender identity different to their phenotype resembled 'Gnostic' approaches to material creation (O'Donovan 2007: 13). This analogy, repeated in *Some issues* (2003: 245-6, 249) is unhelpful, inaccurate, possibly even offensive, and might not have come to mind if the author had grounded his analysis in actual listening to trans people (an option that may not have been available to him when he first wrote).

The omission of trans people's experience, and specifically Trans Christian voices, in the Evangelical Alliance report, *Transsexuality* (2000), is even less excusable given the date it was produced. Written with the ideological intent of resisting legal recognition of gender transition in the UK, the report assumes, rather than demonstrates, that Biblical texts (such as Genesis 1:26-27) convey a timeless message about gender differences, a dogmatic assumption that shows scant appreciation of the complex hermeneutical issues involved.

The report also claims, contrary to the vast majority of scientific evidence and medical practice, that transsexuality is a condition that should be addressed psychologically rather than by hormones and/or surgery. Such extreme dogmatic certainty, without supporting evidence, has always sounded potentially unsafe were it to be applied to the pastoral care of trans people. The case of Marissa Dainton, who returned to her male birth gender as a result of Evangelical Alliance affiliated psychological care, only to transition to female again when the promised 'cure' proved ineffective, graphically illustrates the danger of imposing unsupported theological assumptions on complex human issues (Trans Christians web article).

In fact, both these documents are deficient, from the perspective of practical or pastoral theology, in their failure to research or survey the relevant literature. The result is that there is little or no dialogue or correlation between theology, clinical approaches to trans people, and trans people's self-understanding or experience. The pastoral cycle appears to move from the presenting issue to the theological resources, and finally to a pastoral 'judgement', bypassing the important stages of research, analysis and reflection. Nevertheless, both these documents are quoted largely uncritically in Chapter 7 of *Some issues in human sexuality* which considers transsexualism. This need not have been a problem since this chapter, like the other chapters in the book, is mainly a literature review, but once again 'the literature' in question

is, in the main, theological literature, and there is barely any reference to the crucial scientific and medical literature, let alone any engagement with trans people or Trans Christians, (though this was not necessarily the purpose of the exercise).

It is particularly disappointing for us, as he was an honorary chaplain to the Sibyls, that David Horton's booklet, *Changing Channels? A Christian Response to the Transvestite and Transsexual* (1994), based on the author's extensive ministry within the transgender community, was only referenced rather than discussed in *Some issues*. A more comprehensive engagement, dialogue and correlation with the substantial literature in this field would have provided a robust framework by which to evaluate the theological papers on transsexualism and exposed the 'minority' position of O'Donovan and the Evangelical Alliance. Regrettably, the apparently even-handed approach adopted by *Some issues* is misleading as it suggests that the dogma of this minority position carries equal weight with theological enquiry that has engaged with the relevant clinical studies.

Pastoral & parochial

Disquieting and hurtful as it is to find one's experience caricatured or denied by authors, or in radio and television discussions and reports, most trans people's concerns are of a more practical character, in contrast to the theoretical question of whether their experience is physiological or psychological in origin. For example, 'will I be rejected by my congregation if I am open about the fact that I cross dress?' 'Am I likely to lose my leadership position as youth leader/music director/ Reader, if I undergo gender reassignment?' 'Will my gender transition be an issue if I enter the discernment process for authorised ministry?' 'How is my bishop likely to respond to me as one of his clergy when I inform him that I am transgender and wish to consider gender reassignment?' Other issues, such as the legal right of those who have undergone gender reassignment to marry in their 'acquired' gender, which particularly occupied the Evangelical Alliance, and also *Some issues*, have since been settled by the Gender Recognition Act. However, the faith exemptions to that legislation (some of which appear redundant following the Equality Act 2010), combined with the Church of England's apparent reluctance to embrace equality of opportunity, often leaves trans people vulnerable to ostracism within, or rejection by, their local church.

It was to address concerns of this kind that the Gender Trust commissioned a fact sheet for clergy, ministers, and congregations, later developed into the booklet, *The Transsexual Person is My Neighbour,* (Beardsley 2007 2nd Revised edn.) which encourages pastors to look beyond the problem and at the trans person as a member, in the words of the ordinal, of 'Christ's own flock, bought through the shedding of his blood on the cross.'

Founded in 1996, in its early days the Sibyls was primarily a refuge for those who had been rejected by their churches, and for some its weekend retreats and other meetings were the only occasions where they could receive Holy Communion as themselves. Thankfully, over the last sixteen years people have become better informed about trans peoples' lives, and there is greater understanding that this is not 'a lifestyle choice' or a sign of 'gender

confusion' but a multi-factorial condition that affects a person's physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing.

The Government has acknowledged, in launching its first Transgender Action Plan (2011), that trans people still have much catching up to do in terms of achieving real equality. The Gender Recognition Act (2004) and the Equality Act (2010) have helped to safeguard trans peoples' basic dignities as human beings, yet some may still lose their jobs when they transition because practice lags behind legislation. From our perspective in Sibyls it appears that many local congregations have become more welcoming to trans people than was formerly the case, and we would like to see the Working Party, and then the House of Bishops, affirming this growing hospitality to trans people as an example of gospel welcome to those who have been marginalised in the past, and often still are.

At the institutional level we also wish to see an end to the show of balance about the position of trans people – the 'on the one hand', 'on the other hand' of *Some issues* – through an engagement with, and recognition of, the overwhelming scientific and medical evidence that supports trans people's self-understanding of their experience in contrast to the minority who view it as a psychological delusion. This fairly straightforward exercise in practical theology should be completed as soon as possible lest the hesitation implied in the current position, combined with the church's demands for faith exemptions, undermine the genuine pastoral welcome that trans people are already experiencing.

Both these points are also well made in *Trans Awareness: A Response to "Transsexualism" (Chapter 7) in Some Issues in Human Sexuality* (2008) by the Trans Awareness Group, Hitchin, a fine model for the listening process in relation to trans people by a local church, a copy of which is attached with this submission.

There are two further matters, both addressed in *Some issues*, which we would like to review briefly here: namely, marriage and ordination.

Marriage

One of the unfortunate conditions of the UK's gender recognition legislation is the requirement that those who are married must dissolve their marriage in order to obtain a full Gender Recognition Certificate. Married trans people who believe in the sacred nature of their marriage vows, or who are unwilling to risk financial loss in terms of pensions for their spouses, have refused to take this step which appeared to have been imposed to prevent same-sex marriage by default. We understand, from the Equalities Office, that this anomaly would be removed for these couples, even if they originally married in church, should the UK adopt same-sex civil marriage. Although the timetable for the latter remains uncertain we wish to draw the House of Bishops' attention to the fact that some married trans people have been left in a legal gender limbo by the provisions of the Gender Recognition Act because of their commitment to their spouses, and urge the Bishops to support same-sex civil marriage as a means of resolving this anomaly. We would also like the Bishops to note that the government's decision not to introduce civil partnerships for heterosexual couples will mean

that, should a trans person in a civil partnership transition, they would be faced with a similar dilemma: either to dissolve the civil partnership or not proceed to full gender recognition.

Ordination

According to our reckoning five clergy in the Church of England have transitioned since the late 1990s, and another some years earlier, prior to ordination: of these one has an active retirement ministry, two are in parochial ministry, one is in sector ministry and two were sidelined into secular employment (though they may have permission to officiate). Although their circumstances were quite distinct (one had transitioned prior to ordination, the other over twenty years after ordination) the two parish priests were supported by their bishops. The retired priest was not granted PTO by the bishop when she retired but this was granted by his successor. The priest in sector ministry was not supported by her bishop when she transitioned, but was supported by her new bishop when she moved to a new sector post, and by his successor. One of the priests now in secular employment was invited to step down from their parochial post until their transition was complete but was not, as promised, allowed to return to parochial ministry. The other priest – this was 2002 – was supported by the suffragan, but on meeting the diocesan was told 'either you drop this or you go' and was left with little choice but to go.

This is a very uneven record from the Church of England as an employer. The negativity shown by some bishops to their trans clergy may relate to the dates of these episodes which took place when transition was still a novelty among the clergy. The last ten years have seen better understanding of trans people's experience and needs and the realisation that trans people do not pose an unmanageable risk when engaged in a public role; indeed, that they are likely to perform that role far better after transition.

While we appreciate that clergy and bishops must have the liberty to respond conscientiously in relation to the marriage and ordination of trans people, we hope that the House of Bishops will be kept informed about trans peoples' experience and, in particular, that bishops who are unsure about the deployment of trans clergy have the opportunity to meet with those trans clergy who are engaged in the daily routine of ministry.

We would also welcome a greater transparency from the House of Bishops over this issue. For example, according to the DDO Handbook, Section 2, paragraph 16, 'Sponsorship of transgender candidates' the House of Bishops discussed this issue in 2002 but neither this fact, nor the outcome, has been communicated – so far as we are aware – beyond the pages of the Handbook itself. The advice given to DDOs in this paragraph refers to the decision about transgender candidates as raising 'a doctrinal/ethical' question but does not expand on what that question might be.

The point of the paragraph is to explain that the decision on this matter will rest with the bishop, and not with the Diocesan Adviser; and, moreover, that "any bishop intending to sponsor a transgender candidate for a Bishops' Advisory Panel will certify that he has decided that he would be prepared to ordain and offer a Title to that person if during the course of training and formation she/he were deemed to have a vocation to ordained

ministry." While this guarantee provides the trans person with security, it also seems to imply that they might pose a risk of not being placed if left to the 'open market' process; but what would happen, for example, in a diocese where title posts are at a premium and most ordinands have to seek titles in another diocese? Perhaps this advice, arising from discussions in 2002 is due for revision.

The provision that "Bishops' Advisers assigned to the Bishops' Advisory Panel at which such a candidate was due to be considered would be given the opportunity of declaring in advance whether or not they could conscientiously recommend for training a transgender candidate. In such cases, either they or the candidate would be moved to another Panel" would be inappropriate in secular employment and ought to be reconsidered in the light of the practical theology cycle outlined above and the provisions of the Equality Act 2010 under which gender reassignment is a protected characteristic.

Caring for the spirit

Over a three year period, beginning in 2007, the Sibyls sponsored a 'Gender, Sexuality and Spirituality' workshop which was presented at five LGB&T Christian conferences and weekends, and more recently at the LGBT Health Summits in 2010 and 2011, and the York Spiritual Directors Course in 2011. The background to the workshop, its genesis and contents, and the major themes that emerged have been written up in an article which has just appeared in the journal *Theology & Sexuality* 16.3 (2010; copyright 2012): 261-284 and we will send a hard copy with this submission. Common issues that emerged include the effects of labelling, restrictive gender stereotypes, institutional and societal pressures to conform, the hostility of Church culture, and the reality, for some, of the longed for integration of gender, sexuality and spirituality. We particularly commend the carefully-managed group listening exercise adopted in this workshop, and the 'interplay' model 'identity – role – practice' which is applied in turn to gender, sexuality and spirituality, as templates for the continuing listening process in the Anglican Communion in the hope that it will engage with gender identity and spirituality in addition to sexuality.

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