



My journey towards an Affirming View of sexual intimacy within the context of lifelong same-sex relationships

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What follows is a personal account of my own journey towards the perspective I now hold. It is not intended to be an in-depth theological argument for an Affirming View of sexual intimacy within the context of lifelong same-sex relationships. There are many scholars who have done this, and I would encourage you to dig deeper into how we interpret and apply the Bible. The suggested resources sheet on the same-sex relationships page of our website gives you some ideas about where to start.

I am very aware that it is a privilege to be able to share my journey with you in this way. I am also mindful of the particular responsibility, and the power, that I hold as incumbent of this church. I share this with you humbly, with a deep respect and affection for people within, and outside of, this church who hold a different perspective to me. I cannot claim to know the mind of God, and in the same way that my perspective has shifted in recent years, I am open to it continuing to shift as time goes on.

Influences

My perspective, as with all of us, has been formed by various influences, with the Bible being the key influence. As a teenager I don't think I held a view one way or the other about whether it would be sinful for a Christian to be in a sexual same-sex relationship, but in my early 20's I did begin grappling with this question. Firstly because a Christian friend got engaged to another woman and they went on to have a Civil Partnership celebration in 2007, which after much internal wrestling, I attended. Secondly because I was working for a Christian organisation with a conservative stance about a variety of biblical matters, and that season of life was formative for my faith. So as a young adult I had to navigate the tension between what I believed the Bible said, how this played out in real life relationships, and what it meant for the church missionally, especially as it was also this season of life that I was selected to train for ordination. Becoming a parent, and observing the changes that have happened in our wider culture even during my children's lifetime, has also influenced my perspective over the last decade or so.

As a parent I long for my children to follow Jesus for their whole lives. I am also keen for them to form life-enhancing relationships with others. I also hope and pray that they will choose to follow the radical approach to sex which their parents have modelled. Now that my children are teenagers, I am more aware of the culture that young people are growing up in, and the aspects of it which are now considered to be completely normative. In my role as Vicar I invest a lot of time in ministry to younger generations, I am increasingly conscious of how the church comes across to this demographic, which of course isn't helped by the media headlines and church scandals. Regardless of whether a young Christian is same-sex attracted, the vast majority hold an inclusive perspective regarding same-sex relationships. I passionately want the Gospel to be

proclaimed to younger generations and I believe that the question about same-sex relationships is something that is proving to be a stumbling block for them.

My particular role as a priest

I was ordained in 2012 and since then I have become increasingly aware that what I believe, say and do, as a priest does have a very real impact on how people view the church and also what they understand God to be like. As much as we want to be able to explain the nuance of how we interpret what the Bible says, people outside the church tend to be quick to jump to wrong conclusions about God, based on what they see churches, Christians, and perhaps especially church leaders, doing, or not doing. As an incumbent I don't have the luxury of holding my perspective simply as an individual as I am also having to think carefully about what I teach and how I live, as these things influence and direct the church as a whole.

I am also mindful of the need to ensure that I don't use my power or position to pry or judge others about their sexual choices. *Issues in Human Sexuality*, which was published by the Bishops of the Church of England in 1991 remains the key text in terms of describing the church's stance on these matters. In it we hear: *It has always been the practice of the Church of England to trust its members, and not to carry out intrusive interrogations in order to make sure that they are behaving themselves.* That paragraph goes on to say that doing so would infringe their right to privacy and create distrust and undermine confidence and morale. So clergy have to navigate the tensions between their own personal perspectives, the perspectives held by others in the church, what should, or shouldn't be taught in public settings, and how best to encourage people to grow as disciples of Jesus in private conversations.

A shift in my perspective

Over the last five years, as the Church of England has engaged nationally with the *Living in Love and Faith* suite of resources, my perspective has undergone a slow change, which I describe as 'one click of the dial'. The vast majority of what I believe is no different to my sisters and brothers who hold a traditional view. In just one area my perspective has changed, and I now believe that there is not enough evidence in Scripture to categorise faithful, sexual, same-sex relationships as being outside of the will of God; and I see much evidence in the world to suggest that relationships of this nature can be fruitful and do have a positive impact on our world in much the same way that heterosexual marriage has done for centuries.

I have not changed my perspective around the sanctity of sex, I continue to believe that it is best for Christians to abstain from sex until they have made a public commitment to their partner. If for reasons of death or divorce that first relationship should end, I would still encourage Christians to refrain from sex until they had made a public commitment to a new partner.

The extensive reading that I have done over the last five years has helped me to see that there are many Bible scholars who have drawn attention to the ways in which the most obvious reading of the texts which refer to same-sex sexual activity may have caused the church, over the centuries, to rule out one type of committed relationship which could perhaps honour God. I have become convinced that we cannot use these texts to draw firm conclusions about committed same-sex relationships of the kind that we see in our society today. Whilst it seems

likely that in ancient cultures occasionally people did engage in faithful same-sex relationships, these were very much a minority in comparison with the same-sex sexual activity taking place in other contexts. Also, if there were faithful same-sex relationships, they certainly weren't valued or recognised by the wider society in the same way that such relationships are today.

I have also become convinced that the behaviours referenced in the passages which appear to condemn all same-sex sexual activity refer first and foremost to culturally accepted behaviours and practices which were damaging, hedonistic or idolatrous, sometimes involving abuse. I don't think we should necessarily make the connection between these passages, and what God's view might be concerning sexual intimacy within the context of a lifelong mutually fulfilling same-sex relationship.

So I have concluded that we need to be very careful in drawing conclusions about God's view of a subject on which I believe the Bible to be largely silent. I'm not saying that the Bible is silent on the nature of marriage, but I have become convinced that even though faithful same-sex relationships do not fit the biblical definition of marriage, Christians in these relationships can and do still honour God. I believe that these relationships come within the boundaries of the biblical definition of sexual purity because of the way that they, like heterosexual marriage, embody sacrificial love and faithfulness.

When the Bible appears to not address the question we are seeking an answer to, we have to use other means to determine what God's perspective might be on that particular thing. For example, we don't have any clear guidance in the Bible about the use of technology and so in coming to conclusions about what is a good way for Christians to interact with tech and which ways are less good, we need to look at the fruit of these things. Does the behaviour help me to love others, love myself, love God? Does it honour the things that God honours? When we apply these questions to lifelong same-sex relationships between Christians, I believe we see much evidence of good godly fruit. I believe we see faithfulness, sexual purity and also there can for some couples be fruitfulness in child bearing or rearing.

That said, I am grateful that the Church of England hasn't revised the doctrine of marriage. Marriage is, in my mind, still between one man and one woman, but the church has always taught that there are a wide range of relationships which are good and fruitful. The difference between this doctrine, and my perspective, is that currently marriage is the only relationship which, according to historic teaching, can be a container for sexual intimacy (though just because it can, doesn't mean it always will, for a whole variety of reasons). Where my view has shifted 'one click of the dial' is that I now believe that there is insufficient evidence in scripture to condemn sexual intimacy within same-sex relationships, and given that none of us can truly claim to know the mind of God, I want to err on the side of generous inclusion with regards this.

I have a great amount of respect for those who have similarly wrestled with this matter and reached a different conclusion to me. The reason that the Church of England is finding this so difficult to navigate is because we cannot agree what sort of an issue this is. Some argue that it is a matter of 'first order' meaning that those who hold a different perspective have misunderstood something absolutely fundamental about our faith. Others would deem it to be

a matter about which Christians can agree to disagree. I am very much of the latter view. I would have no problem at all supporting and honouring a same-sex attracted individual who has wrestled with Scripture and feels that God is calling them to celibacy. But I would also be willing to pray with a same-sex couple, asking God to bless their relationship. In the same way, I would support and encourage heterosexuals who feel called to the vocation of celibacy as well as those who choose marriage.

I don't find this both/and approach conflicting because what it looks like in practice to follow Jesus and honour God is always going to look slightly different from person to person. But I cannot in good conscience publicly condemn relationships which are based upon love and faithfulness, and which are fruitful in a variety of ways. Jesus challenges His followers to all kinds of self-sacrifice, but He primarily calls us to be like Him. To put on love and faithfulness, and that is what I am seeing His people do when they enter into lifelong same-sex relationships.

I realise that some people would see this as the thin end of the wedge, or the top of a slippery slope, but I respectfully disagree. I am trying to affirm, where I see them, things that are close to God's heart – love and faithfulness, and in doing so I am certainly not advocating promiscuity, polyamory or the trivialisation of sex. My heart breaks at the rise of gender fluidity and self-identification. The choices that some people are making are particularly troubling, and the church will need to work out how to respond, but I believe they are fundamentally different to the decision to enter into a lifelong same-sex relationship. In a culture where it might feel like 'anything goes' I believe we need to be teaching and celebrating lifelong faithfulness in relationships, and saving sex for these contexts, because this is truly radical in our culture today.

Asking for God's blessing

I want to share some brief reflections about the liturgical resources known as the Prayers of Love and Faith (PLF). The prayers within this publication have been put together by the House of Bishops, and in December 2023 they were commended for use by clergy, should they choose to do so, for a trial period of three years. The PLF are broad in their scope, and many of them are uncontroversial, but they do contain a small number of prayers which ask God to bless individuals who have chosen to be in a same-sex relationship. In relation to these prayers, I want to highlight that ministers are asking God to do the blessing, which of course He could choose to do, or not, and also the prayers have been carefully worded to ask God to bless the individuals within the relationship rather than the relationship itself. Many within the Church of England were disappointed by the 'liturgical gymnastics' which were used in the formulation of these prayers. I don't want to pass judgement on what we have ended up with, but I do want to be clear that I am willing to use these prayers with a same-sex couple, if asked to do so. The PCC of St Mary's have given consent for the PLF to be used by clergy at St Mary's if they are approached by same-sex couples who ask for this. As Vicar I value unity within the church very highly and believe it is my responsibility to maintain unity as far as possible. In light of that, I will give careful thought about the best context within which to use the PLF with a couple who approach me about doing so, recognising that there are some people within the worshipping community who would find it difficult to be present for this.

Over the years there have been various revisions to aspects of Church of England practice. Usually these have come in the form of pastoral adjustments – not changing the doctrine, for example that marriage is a lifelong union, but acknowledging that there will be cases where a marriage cannot or should not continue, and will end in divorce. These pastoral adjustments have the intention of widening the net in order that increasing numbers of people feel, in overt tangible ways, welcome in the church, and welcomed by God into His family. I believe that the Good News about Jesus is universal. What the declaration 'Jesus is Lord' looks like in practice in the life of the believer is individual and we should expect the Holy Spirit to convict people of sin in uniquely personal ways. The evangelist Billy Graham famously said ***It's God's job to judge, the Holy Spirit's job to convict, and our job to love.*** However, it is also the church's job to teach, and love, of course, doesn't mean giving people everything they want.

Finally, when I was ordained as a priest, the service contained these words of declaration which date back to the beginning of the Church of England and were written by Thomas Cranmer: *Priests are to proclaim the Word of the Lord and to watch for the signs of God's new creation. They are to be messenger, sentinels and stewards of the Lord.* I take seriously what it means to watch for the signs of the new creation – to notice what God is doing in the world and to point others towards it. In essence this is what a sentinel is called to do. They are the watchmen on the walls – those who are staying awake, alert to the friend or foe coming over the horizon. What I have noticed over the last few years is that there are now relationships within our society which reflect the same love and faithfulness that we have historically seen in heterosexual marriage. I believe that my role as a priestly sentinel, a watchwoman, is to point to what is good and godly in the world, and to help move God's people towards those things. Others who have taken this seriously have gone before me, and their witness has led to various revisions in doctrine and practice. This is the issue on the table in our time, and I take seriously my responsibility to notice what God seems to be doing in the world and to lead the church in that direction, whilst still ensuring that people who hold a different perspective to me feel safe, valued, loved and respected within the church family.

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