

Discerning Inclusion at St Mary's Stoke Bishop

A summary: From Nov 2024 – May 2025 the St Mary's PCC and Leadership Team (LT) went on a journey of prayerful discernment prompted by the debate happening at a national level within the Church of England, and more widely amongst Christians. The question used to focus our thinking was: **Could committed same-sex relationships, which are sexual in nature, honour God and reflect His love to the world?**

In March a significant majority (89%) of the PCC and LT voted in favour of positioning **St Mary's as being a church where a range of perspectives can be held and respected concerning the above question.** This led to further work as we sought to determine what this would mean in practice.

On 14 May 2025 the PCC and LT voted on the wording of the Guiding Statements document, with each member being able to choose between different wording for each of the areas of church life outlined. **This document is now in place for at least three years,** after which the PCC can choose to revisit it.

Steps in the process

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| Oct 2021 | ♦ As a Mission Area 65 people took part in the <i>Living in Love and Faith</i> course. |
| Nov 2024 | ♦ After careful thought the Vicar initiated the Discerning Inclusion process and invited PCC members to engage with this subject through study and prayer. |
| Jan 2025 | ♦ All PCC members opted to engage with the process and voted to proceed with the initial steps proposed by the Vicar.
♦ The church family were informed that the process was taking place, and invited to complete a survey sharing their views . The purpose of this was to determine whether the range of perspectives held by the PCC and LT were representative of the church family on this matter, and the data indicated that this was the case.
♦ An open invitation to join with the Vicar in prayer each week was extended to the church family, along with the opportunity to meet confidentially with the Chaplain appointed for this process, if individuals would find that helpful, and/or to meet 1-2-1 with the Vicar to discuss matters further. During the process the Vicar met with almost every PCC member individually at least once. |
| Feb 2025 | ♦ The PCC took part in the first of three special sessions. This initial one, entitled <i>Establishing Good Foundations</i> was facilitated by Rev Jeremy Andrew (Bristol Diocese) and sought to ensure that the process was based on respect, trust and openness. The PCC reflected on some of the data from the church survey and began to think about the possible impact of the various outcomes that could be reached. The Vicar and Associate Vicar shared their personal perspectives. |

- Mar 2025**
- ♦ The second special session ***Digging into the Bible*** was held in early March and attended by over 70 church members, including most of the PCC. With input from Oliver Home and Prof Julian Rivers, backed up with extensive further reading, participants were encouraged to **grapple with the biblical teaching concerning sexual ethics**, and to reflect on the journey that the Church of England has undertaken concerning same-sex relationships, as well as other ethical matters in recent decades. At this session the Vicar shared her perspective with those attending. Session content was made available to those unable to attend.
 - ♦ In mid-March at the routine PCC meeting, some adjustments to the proposed steps in the process were agreed. Following this, the PCC were asked whether to base further decisions on the **starting premise** that *St Mary's should be a church where a range of perspectives can be held and respected concerning same-sex relationships*, and 89% of the PCC voted in favour of this.
- Apr 2025**
- ♦ The final special session entitled ***What this means in practice*** took place, and gave the PCC an opportunity to work in groups, honing **a draft of the Guiding Statements document**, which contained within it some possible approaches to our practice as a church that would later be voted on.
 - ♦ The Leadership Team were empowered by the PCC to make some further adjustments to the document following feedback at the meeting, and the final draft was shared with the PCC two weeks before the vote, to allow time for prayerful reflection and feedback to the Vicar.
- May 2025**
- ♦ At the PCC meeting on 14 May **voting took place to determine the wording of for each of the areas of church life outlined in the Guiding Statements document**. The final document has now been approved and is available via the church website (under the 'Life Events' tab). The percentage of voters in favour has been noted within the document. The document as a whole was approved by a 74% majority. Whilst *The Prayers of Love and Faith* have been approved for use at St Mary's, the Vicar retains the right to decide the most pastorally sensitive approach to any requests that are made within the agreed boundaries.

What next? The Guiding Statements document is now public and summarises the position that St Mary's has taken regarding this matter.

- Everyone at St Mary's is encouraged to read it, particularly with reference to the expectations around *loving disagreement* (page 1).
- Individuals wishing to discuss this further with the Vicar are invited to make an appointment to do so.
- The Vicar will be in touch with people holding leadership roles currently to go through the Guiding Statements document more closely.
- Resources for further reflection are available via the church website.
- **All church members are expected to interact respectfully with one another**, particularly with those whose perspectives differ from their own.

If there seems to be an appetite for it, a short course may be offered in the Autumn, such as *The Unity Course* or *The Difference Course*.