

## Some reflections on the Discerning Inclusion process at St Mary's Stoke Bishop

**At the APCM (Annual Meeting) in May 2025 the outcomes of the PCC's six-month *Discerning Inclusion* process were shared with the church family. This paper has been written in light of that, recognising the current fragility of our unity as a church. These reflections are intended to help the church family to understand why the process was initiated by the Vicar, and to offer some thoughts around moving forwards together in loving disagreement.**

**Revd Jema Ball, May 2025**

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It encourages me that from the earliest moments of the Church, there have been disagreements which Christians have needed to navigate. Acts and the Epistles give us insights into many of those disagreements, some of which were hugely significant and the decisions reached recalibrated the church in various ways.

One way of dealing with disagreements is to fragment. Arguably all denominations, the Church of England included, have been formed as a result of conflict caused by differences of opinion, which have led to a splinter group separating themselves from the larger body. Whether this honours the Body of Christ is a question far beyond the scope of this paper!

Nationally the Church of England has, for more than a decade, been hotly debating the matter of whether sexual intimacy within lifelong same-sex relationships honours God, and whether couples entering into these relationships should be offered the same opportunities as opposite-sex couples to make promises to one another in the context of a church service. The diversity of viewpoints is broad, and the Church of England has always sought to prioritise unity. Most people who have kept up with the details of the debate in recent years acknowledge that the process has not been handled well at a national level, though it's worth remembering what a difficult thing it is that these leaders have been tasked with!

One reason why this particular debate has proved so difficult is because collectively Christians cannot agree on the kind of issue this is. For some it is a 'non-issue' and for others it is something extremely important. To try and illustrate this I offer these responses from five 'voices' representing some of the different perspectives. You might hear echoes of your own stance in one or more of these five caricatures.

**Voice 1:** *I believe that the Bible makes it entirely clear that sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage is sinful. So if a church were to teach anything other than this, I would consider it to be teaching heresy and in danger of leading people into sin.*

**Voice 2:** *My reading of the Bible has led me to conclude that sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage is sinful. However, I am willing to accept that other Christians reach different conclusions. Whilst I think that they are wrong, I am trying to put relational unity ahead of everything else.*

**Voice 3:** *I believe that this matter is one about which Christians can reach different conclusions, depending on how they interpret the Bible and apply it to our cultural context. I wouldn't want to say that one perspective was right and another wrong, so long as people have engaged with what the Bible says and are willing to hold their view humbly and compassionately, I don't mind which conclusion is reached.*

**Voice 4:** *My perspective is that sexual intimacy within lifelong same-sex relationships can honour God, and I am keen for this to be expressed in the teaching of the church that I am part of. However, I am willing to accept that other Christians reach different conclusions. Whilst I think that they are wrong, I am trying to put relational unity ahead of everything else.*

**Voice 5:** *I believe that all Christians should be advocating for same-sex relationships to be treated in the same way as heterosexual marriage. I would find it difficult to be in a church where there were people whose perspective was different from mine because I am concerned that they have misunderstood something fundamental about the inclusivity of the message of Jesus.*

Since becoming Vicar of St Mary's in 2019, it has become apparent to me that, to a greater or lesser degree, all five of these 'voices' exist at St Mary's. This is unusual (but not unique) for a church. At St Mary's we place a high priority on teaching from the Bible, but we are also a parish church seeking to welcome a broad range of people, as opposed to being a gathered community who choose to worship together because they align around a defined set of beliefs or priorities. We see this worked out in our worship styles, for example. Our three Sunday services are seeking to offer a fairly wide range of ways for people to encounter God. We are a church which tries to offer something to people of all ages and personalities.

In many ways this is a very good thing. But it was creating a problem. Here are some other 'voices' which seek to reflect the different reasons people have chosen to settle at St Mary's in recent years:

**Voice A:** *I'm pleased to bring my young family to St Mary's because it's such a welcoming, inclusive church and I am confident that my children will be taught that everyone is made in God's image and loved and accepted by Him.*

**Voice B:** *I'm part of this church because my previous church took a very black and white stance about particular issues. I like that there is room for differences of perspective at St Mary's. We're a church that is OK with the shades of grey.*

**Voice C:** *I'm a member of this church because I am confident that the teaching will reflect my understanding of the Bible. St Mary's is a church with a strong evangelical heritage and I am keen to see that continue.*

**Voice D:** *I'm quite new here. I came along because a friend invited me after I had been bereaved. I've done Alpha but I'm still finding my way with what it really means to be a Christian. My focus has been trying to build friendships with others in the church so that I can feel like I belong.*

**Voice E:** *I joined St Mary's after moving into the area with my partner. I've enjoyed getting involved in various ways. I assumed that everyone would be fine that I was in a Civil Partnership and didn't feel the need to mention this whilst I was building relationships with people.*

Hopefully these 'voices' demonstrate that it is possible for two people to hold opposite perspectives about what kind of church we are, particularly in relation to controversial topics. A phrase which kept coming into my mind as I prayed about this (over a couple of years) was *clarity is kindness*. I became increasingly aware of the value of acknowledging the elephant in the room, using the controversial subject facing Christians today, in order to bring some clarity to the positioning of St Mary's, enabling us to articulate what kind of a church we are.

So these were some of the things which prompted me to initiate the Discerning Inclusion process at St Mary's. There is much that I love about the Church of England, despite its *many* faults and failures, and one such thing is its breadth. The parish system means that no matter where you live in England, you have a parish church. Whilst I don't understand, or necessarily delight in, every expression of Anglicanism within our land, I am grateful that the Church of England offers a wide range of worship styles, biblical approaches and missional initiatives, because it is one of the ways in which the net is cast as widely as possible when seeking to communicate the Good News about Jesus.

Richard Baxter (1615-1691) was a prominent clergyman in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He was known as a peacemaker who sought unity among the clashing Protestant denominations, and as such he found himself at the centre of nearly every major controversy in England during that period.

He is quoted as saying: *In essentials unity; in non-essentials liberty; in all things love.*

In John 17 Jesus prays for his followers to be unified. *Father may they be one as we are one.* In a symbolic sense this may well be the case, but in practice when we look at the church, the Body of Christ, locally, nationally and globally, we seem to be anything but unified. On the St Mary's website you can listen to [a sermon that I gave on this passage](#) on 18 May 2025 which unpacks this further.

Reflecting on this (as yet) unanswered prayer of Jesus, Richard Baxter advocated that Christians hold a posture of gracious, generous orthodoxy. He urged the church to keep things

simple, refuse to obsess about peripheral matters, and recognise that our current opinions about non-essentials are unlikely to be universally important and absolutely correct.

I personally think that the most important outcome of the *Discerning Inclusion* process that the PCC have been on is that conclusion that: *St Mary's is a church where a range of perspectives are held and respected concerning how to interpret what the Bible teaches about sexual intimacy within same-sex relationships.*

In practice, this means that the subject of what God thinks about same-sex relationships is not a matter of first importance at St Mary's. If we were to use Baxter's definition, a significant majority of the PCC deemed the various perspectives held about same-sex relationships to be a 'non-essential' matter.

How then might we helpfully define the 'essentials' of our faith? Again, there are different ways that Christians do this, but I personally think that the Nicene Creed (in full on page 6) is a very helpful statement of the core (essential) Christian beliefs. It was formulated in 325 AD by the Council of Nicaea (not without controversy, I should add!) and it has been used to unite Christians all over the world for centuries. It's important to note that the Creed focusses on how we, as fallible human beings, can understand who God is and what Christ came to earth to do. It does not reference any human behaviours, sinful or otherwise.

Let's return to the first five 'voices' offered in this paper (Voices 1-5). Given the fervour with which these perspectives are held, Voice 1 and Voice 5 might find it difficult to be part of a church which has placed the questions around same-sex relationships in the 'non-essentials' category. I am aware of a small number of people at St Mary's who feel this way, and it is with deep sadness and regret that they have chosen to leave our church and worship elsewhere. I lament that the process has led people to feel that they have no choice but to leave, but I do very much respect the integrity of these individuals. They have spent time discerning where they stand, and have been willing to take painful, costly action in order to follow through on this. I am praying that they will quickly be embraced by other churches and find new ways to serve and grow there.

I'm not suggesting that those who remain at St Mary's consider the 'non-essential' matters like this one, to be unimportant – far from it! The care and time spent on our Discerning Inclusion process is testament to the fact that we have addressed this seriously and carefully. But I do think it's important that this matter, and other 'non-essentials', are not used to define orthodoxy or divide the Church. Hopefully the vast majority of people at St Mary's will feel content to continue to be in fellowship with one another, despite our different perspectives.

The Guiding Statements document lists some ways in which we can seek, at St Mary's, to maintain our unity through loving disagreement.

- By affirming that every human being is equally loved by God and invited to be part of His family, the church, through their saving faith in Jesus Christ.
- By extending a generous welcome to all, seeking to reflect the diversity of the global church and by acknowledging that we all daily fall short of the glory of God.

- When disagreements arise within the church we move towards each other in love, seeking first to find points of unity and common ground.
- When sharing our own perspectives, particularly around sensitive topics, we do so with humility and respect, remembering that, as fallible human beings, we can never completely know the mind of God.
- We encourage one another to engage prayerfully and deeply with the Bible, when seeking God's guidance and teaching on all matters relating to the Christian faith.

Christopher Landau, former BBC religion correspondent and a Professor of Christian ethics, has recently written a booklet entitled '[\*Compassionate Orthodoxy and Sexuality\*](#)'. He has also published a longer book called [\*Loving Disagreement\*](#) from which [\*The Unity Course\*](#) has been formulated. These new resources are aimed at churches like St Mary's who are seeking to find ways to hold together a range of diverse perspectives, within one church family. If you are keen to dig deeper into what *loving disagreement* means in practice, I commend these resources to you.

I am considering how best for us to engage in *loving disagreement* in the coming months, it will probably be primarily through our teaching on Sundays, and perhaps also in Home Groups. Landau is clear that we should not be pursuing '*unity at all costs*'. The Scriptures call us to defend and teach the Christian faith and not depart from it. Churches facing complex issues are called to not abandon orthodoxy (which I have defined in this paper as being the statements about God in the Nicene Creed) whilst also seeking to model ourselves on the compassion of Christ in our interactions with those within, and outside of, the church.

He urges local churches to: *neither present a narrow legalism or unbounded liberalism, but rather to encourage every member of the community to grow in faith, taking up their cross, and following Christ in the power of the Spirit.*

In this season of fragility for St Mary's, **please join me in praying for our church, for those who are part of it, those who have regrettably decided to leave, and those who are yet to join.** Pray that we will model loving disagreement, seeking to be one, not in perspective or opinion, but one in Christ.

St Paul writes to the Ephesians:

*As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*

Ephesians 4:1-6

## **The Nicene Creed**

We believe in one God,  
the Father, the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all that is,  
seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
of one Being with the Father;  
through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven,  
was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary  
and was made man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered death and was buried.

On the third day he rose again  
in accordance with the Scriptures;  
he ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,  
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,  
who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified,  
who has spoken through the prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come.

Amen.