

Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me? Transgender People, Gender, Sex, and the Living in Love and Faith Programme¹

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On the 9th November 2020 the Church of England published the results of its long-awaited study on “Living in Love and Faith” (LLf), which addresses issues of gender and sexuality within a divided Church: These divisions have been coming into sharper focus because of society’s changing perspectives and practices, especially in relation to lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual and intersex people. The LLf programme, is intended to help the Church understand what it means to follow Christ in love and faith in regard to the questions about human identity and the variety of patterns of relationship emerging in our society, including marriage, civil partnership, cohabitation, celibacy and friendship. Thus, the aim of this process is to create a radical new vision of inclusion.

Page three of the report notes that the LLf programme makes no recommendations or guarantees of an agreed way forward for the Church in relation to human identity, sexuality, relationships, and marriage. It is also stated that the resources provided are only intended to initiate a process of *“Whole church learning and engagement”*. That vision demands a truly listening Church. Already many people are and have been passing judgement on the reports and material even before it was released. Instead of commenting in detail on the report I want to examine what true listening and radical inclusion should mean.

We may find some indication of what that listening means when we read the passage from John 14: 2-14. Here Jesus says: *“In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to where I am going”*. Thomas, said to him, *“Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”* Jesus said to him, *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”*

Philip said to him, *“Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.”* Jesus said to him, *“Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me*

¹ Document available at Gilchrist, S. (2020): *“Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me?”*: <http://www.tgdr.co.uk/documents/036B-HowLong.pdf>

² Personal biography at: <http://www.tgdr.co.uk/documents/SusanBiographyPapers.pdf>

has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.

In this passage Philip said to Jesus, *"Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us."* To be shown does not necessarily mean to see. In this house there are many rooms, but too often doors are shut to keep people out. To see, means to break through the barriers caused by misunderstanding, ignorance, suspicion, rejection, and hate.

What have these barriers created? In the United Kingdom transphobic hate crime reports have quadrupled over the past five years. In October 2020, an article in the Daily Telegraph reported that hate crimes topped more than 100,000 for the first time. A major reason for this increase is because there are disputes about the origins of these conditions: It is considered that the origins are not well understood. One group, mainly from the feminist movements argue that it is a paraphilia. This term, with its arguments identify it as a disruption to the normal path of development which is driven by sublimated sexual motivations. The other group, which represent a consensus view of the professional medical institutions, argue that it is a personality variation, which is within the normal range of human development, and it is driven by the search for identity instead. Depending on which diagnosis you choose, the methods of management are almost opposite to one another.

So, what are the consequences? One of these sides dismisses gender identity as a purely social construct, the other places it at the heart of the personality that is created. On one side the transgender person is presented as the perpetrator: on the other that person becomes the sufferer instead. What is seen as compassion by one side is automatically condemned as coercion by the other. It is these differences which provide the background for what has become a toxic dispute. Of course, all viewpoints must be objectively analysed and truthfully examined. That is most notably true in every argument which claims to use science to justify its position. But when some on one side attack the other with accusations of malpractice, and dismisses it with the statement that: *"Their teaching is backed by no credible science but has been adopted by government, the NHS, schools, and therapists"*³, and when some on the other side respond in equal measure by threatening and disrupting meetings of people who oppose them, or when Christian groups refuse to even consider the possibility of re-interpretation of an entrenched theological position then, regardless of your viewpoint, the capacity for listening is destroyed⁴.

And what does the Gospel tell us about these disputes? In the Gospel of John, Thomas, said to Jesus: *"Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"*. When Philip said to Jesus, *"Lord, show us the Father"*, he was asking for Jesus to prove his statement, but Jesus did not provide it, instead he described journeys people make. Thus when Jesus responded by saying: *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life"* he was telling them not to rely on the sort of evidence that Philip wanted, but follow the example of how he lived his life, and how other people live their lives. He reinforced this statement by saying: *"No one comes to the Father except through me" also "Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves"*. That seems to rule out other approaches. In the statement *"Become Passers By"* in the admittedly apocryphal Gospel of Thomas Jesus was telling people not to listen to the machinations of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Instead, he was saying for true listening, listen first to the

³ From the Transgender Trend Website: Transgender Trend (2019): *"Impact of Teaching Gender Identity to Children"*: <https://www.transgendertrend.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Impact-of-Teaching-Gender-Identity-to-Children.pdf> [Accessed July 2020]

⁴ For my own research in these areas see: <http://www.tgdr.co.uk/articles/bibliography.htm>

stories and experiences of real people: not to the pundits of his own time or even to those in the present Church.

For transgender people, this is not the only challenge to be met. All lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people disrupt the accepted order of any society where gender complementary is socially and legally enforced. This is regardless of the morality of their acts. Today and throughout history, sexual abuse, together with the abuses of power within sex and gender unequal societies is and has been horrendous: and this must be totally and unambiguously condemned. For historical reasons, a sexual motive has always been presumed, but listening to the experiences of gender and sexually variant people shows that the driving forces behind them are those of love and identity instead. People do disrupt gender and sexuality for many reasons. Motives may be misjudged, and many describe the current plight of transgender people as being equivalent to that of the gay rights movement in the 1980s and 1990s. Today we know this to be about love and identity, not dissolution and sex.

Then, for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Thus without exception, all people, who seek live their lives in ways that fulfil the love of Christ... and that welcome includes, transgender, transsexual, lesbian, gay, heterosexual and bisexual people... and who also seek to express their identities within roles that are true to themselves, must be fully accepted in their own right... If we are truly to build the house of many rooms that Jesus refers to, we must listen and hear from each other with love and respect.

Sadly, and too often, instead of seeking to listen, we use what we hear about each other to condemn those we disagree with. Listening becomes more difficult if the condemnations become too great, and it may be made impossible if criminalisation occurs. To listen with an open mind is all that is asked. Jesus was despised and rejected because he broke the mould. Instead of trying to prove our own agendas by attempting to turn science and theology into weapons which we use to condemn others, we should follow the example of Jesus... who refused to give Philip the proof that he wanted, and who instead showed the way is through the example of how he lived his life. And it is by following this pattern of listening and caring that we come to know Jesus. *“If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”* Therefore, in this spirit, let us resolve to go forward and make this house of Jesus a home where love can dwell, a house where all are welcomed, and a house which shines with the Love of Christ.

The Bishops tell us that the intention is to discern the way forward over the next two years, to gain the radical inclusion that is sought. As a scientist and academic I appreciate and understand the importance of using intensive and objective knowledge and engaging in thorough research. As a contributor to and supporter of the LLf programme I welcome the publication of this work, although I do have concerns about some of the material contained in the book. However, it is over 480 pages long and extensive study programmes are also provided. The Bishops say that the resources provided are only intended to initiate a process of *“Whole church learning and engagement”*, thus this work is yet another in the long line of many Church of England reports and documents which talks about the problems with gender and sexuality without tackling them⁵. I also note that certain groups are already intent on preparing guides to the LLf which will satisfy the sectional viewpoints of their own members, who may also have little interest, information or time to digest the mass of material that is provided. With such little purpose on the way of guidance coming from the LLf programme, this information becomes open to abuse.

⁵ There have been many reports, the conclusions of which have not been acted upon, or ignored. In 2014 the Church of England began a “Shared Conversation” programme that was intended to address these issues but the stated purpose of the LLf programme, which was only initiated following an impasse in 2017 suggests that little was learnt from that process.

This potential is already evident in the issue of two videos timed to coincide with the release of the LLf resources. A video *“The Beautiful Story”* produced by the Church of England Evangelical Council (CEEC), is already being defended by the Bishop of Blackburn, the Rt Revd Julian Henderson *“as not being intended to shut down or derail conversations about sexuality”* in the LLf programme. A second video, by Christian Concern takes the videos that the LLf programme has produced for its own educational purposes and has edited these without permission by interspersing them with its own comments. Not only is that an attack on the good faith of the people who contributed to the original videos, it disregards their safeguarding concerns, it almost certainly breaches copyright and is being investigated as hate crime by the police. Other videos representing different viewpoints could have been presented. What is perhaps significant that these videos must have been made even before the LLf resources were released. In citing these videos my aim is not to highlight their theologies, but to illustrate how listening is denied.

Surely the essence of the Christian Gospel lies in the hearts and minds of people in a Gospel of Love, rather than in any institutions or dogmas that are created. This is perhaps what Jesus meant when, according to the Gospel of Thomas, he said *“Become Passers By”*. Such a reference to Thomas is hardly necessary when Jesus demonstrated this *“passing by”* in his own actions, which are described in the gospels many times. So, who should be passed by? Should the people being passed by be those in the Churches and religious organisations of today who are driven in pursuit of their own arguments and dogmas? Or should the people being passed by reside in the rest of society, outside these organisations, who have been willing to listen, and to change the framework of society according to what they have seen and heard.

The condemnations that Jesus applied to the Scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23:33 *“You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?”* or elsewhere in Luke 11:37–54 is hardly moderate in tone. When taken out of context, the statement by Jesus: *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”* could be used by any pundit to reinforce any argument, but when it is taken in the context of the passage, as it must be, it demands a truly listening church. Properly used the LLf material provides a valuable resource, but unless we find the radical sense of listening and inclusion that Jesus presents, and until we fully embrace each other in the Gospel of Christian love, we will continue to make the Churches less relevant to the needs of people, of society, and become *“Passers By”* in the world.

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