

PASTORAL PRINCIPLES (October 10, 2021)

(Roman 15:2-7; Galatians 5:22-23)

Years ago, I was sitting on a sofa, in a church office, sandwiched by two ladies, who with me were attending a tutorial on Holy Communion. I found interesting the reactions of my fellow students when our tutor, the assistant chaplain, spoke about the bread. The lady on my right waxed lyrical about the mystical and sacramental nature of consecrated bread, while the lady on my left declared, "A piece of bread is a piece of bread is a piece of bread." The English lady on my right could be described as traditional Anglican and the American lady on my left hailed from a Southern Baptist background.

The church we were attending was St Michael's Anglican church in Paris. The year was 2002. As in many Anglican churches, there were different preferences in churchmanship amongst the congregation members, and it seemed that the preferences were somewhat linked to people's stages of life. Older folk attended the quieter 9:30 Book of Common Prayer service, but there were some younger people as well who appreciated the traditional liturgy and organ-accompanied hymns. Families attended the more raucous, or perhaps I should say, more 'lively' 11:15 service, where the singing was often led by a music group that included drums and guitar. And university students and young professionals attended the Sunday evening contemporary worship service.

La Côte Anglican church shares quite a few characteristics with St Michael's, for example, the existence of preferences amongst us for certain types of church services and musical styles. However, in the years I have been at La Côte, I sense there is a desire that La Côte be a spiritual home for Anglican diversity.

La Côte is also a spiritual home for Christians from other church traditions as we welcome expatriates who come to the region for work or study, and we also welcome local Christians who wish to attend an English-speaking Anglican church.

As a Christian, these past ten years of living in a region that straddles Switzerland and France have been most precious for me. I have expat friends who attend the Crossroads churches in Ferney-Voltaire and Thoiry, Westlake Church in Nyon, the Scottish church in the old town, and Holy Trinity Church and St. John XXIII in Geneva, as well as many friends who are members of the local Cursillo community, which is ecumenical. Despite our different ecclesiastical affiliations, backgrounds and experiences, we believe and declare that “we are one body because we all share in one bread.”

But...let's consider how rigid, or how porous our boundaries are. We feel that we can be one with someone with different Anglican churchmanship, or with someone from another church tradition. We feel that we can welcome them and affirm them...but what about if someone turns up who is very different to anyone of us? Will we welcome and include such people within our church community? Will we embrace and affirm them? Can we, will we say with them that "we are one body because we all share in one bread"? Or would affirmation and embrace of a great variety of human experience be too many bridges for us to cross? Is there some line in the sand that cannot be crossed for a host of reasons?

In 2017, in response to differing perspectives on same-sex marriage, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York committed themselves and the House of Bishops to the creation of a Pastoral Advisory Group. The purpose of the advisory group is to help churches bring about the Archbishops' desire for "radical Christian inclusion found in scripture, in reason, in tradition, in theology, and the Christian faith as the Church of England has received it," and to offer pastoral care to all people, especially in the context of changing perspectives on gender, identity and sexuality.

As you can imagine, lots of discussion accompanied by lots of writing ensued, which were crystallized and summarized into this: *Held together in the love of Christ: Pastoral principles for living well together*.



These pastoral principles invite members of Anglican church communities, such as ours, to examine afresh their life and learning together in the light of difference and diversity, and to think about the things which can impair or enhance caring and supportive relationships. Although the Pastoral Principles were developed to encourage inclusion of LGBTI+ people, they can be applied to other differences that might arise within a church community.



The pastoral principles identify six ‘pervading evils’: prejudice, silence, ignorance, fear, hypocrisy, and power. These can hinder our personal growth as

Christians, hurt other people, and create barriers that stop our churches from growing into Christian communities of welcome and belonging. They are the opposite of the fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5 as read out by Mark/Christine. And while it is easy to see these ‘evils’ in others; the really hard work is to see them within ourselves. Think of Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount about the mote in my sister’s or brother’s eye and the beam in my own.

[The six pastoral principles are displayed on the walls / power point slide.]

Each principle raises vital questions about, and challenges to, the ways in which we live out our faith.

The first one encourages us to “acknowledge prejudice.” This principle applies to all our relationships with people who are different from us, whether because of age, nationality, ethnicity, education, upbringing, sexuality, gender identity, or any other characteristic. We are asked: How may we welcome people as they are, rather than welcoming them in the hope that they will become and behave “like us”? We are urged to open our hearts and minds to value those with whom we disagree. We are encouraged to reflect deeply on our attitudes and behaviour in order to extend a Christ-like loving embrace to all people in our midst.

The second pastoral principle calls us to “speak into silence.” We are asked: Can it be right for our church communities to remain silent – whether consciously or unwittingly – to remain silent about matters relating to racism, identity, sexuality and gender? The Pastoral Advisory Group concluded that when misused, silence can shelter abuses of power. If the church wishes to welcome everyone, no matter their personal circumstances, then we can choose to voice this welcome in words that liberate and heal.

The third principle “addresses ignorance.” It is inevitable that there are issues about which we are relatively ignorant. We are not omniscient. We are asked whether it is right to remain ignorant of what it is like to be different: of different national, ethnic or racial origins, different cultures, different sexual identity. We are encouraged to ask Jesus to lead us to the truth that will set us and others free.

The fourth principle is about “casting out fear.” There can be fear of “breaking ranks” and speaking out. Some may fear that if their personal circumstances are known, then friendships may be affected. We are asked: Can it be right that people live in fear of one another in our churches? How can we live out the perfect love that casts out fear?

The fifth principle calls church members to “admit hypocrisy.” This deals with practising integrity and shining light on structures and practices that promote evasiveness that can be seen as hypocrisy. Judgmentalism and a preoccupation with appearances can lead to hypocrisy. We are asked: “Can it be right that there are situations where people feel forced to hide important aspects of their lives, such as their sexuality or gender identity, or where church communities find themselves evading discussion of these matters?” How can we build open and trusting relationships in the face of disagreement? And how do we acknowledge that we are all children of God and that not one of us is outside the love of God?

The sixth and last principle instructs us to “pay attention to power.” We need to learn to become more aware of both our own power and of our vulnerability to the perceived power of others, and to notice and call out when power is exercised inappropriately. We are encouraged to help one another recognize the different kinds of power at work in our church as a result of our role, age, social status, nationality, ethnicity, language, sexuality, gender and other characteristics. We are encouraged to approach others with humility and mutual respect.

So, regarding these six pastoral principles ... Is there one with which you feel you have considerable difficulty, perhaps more than the others?

Let me share with you a little of how I have wrestled with two of these principles: addressing my ignorance and acknowledging my prejudice. The experience has been transformative for me.

My attitude towards homosexuality was formed by a Christian tradition that teaches that homosexuality is a sin, a deviant variant of sexual promiscuity. Until about fifteen years ago, I did not consciously know any homosexual people or indeed anybody from the LGBTQI+ community. My shallow perspective was informed by lurid media portrayals of gay pride parades and fleeting condemnatory words from the pulpit.

My family love to discuss, or more accurately, argue together! We have had many impassioned discussions over the topic of human sexuality. So, my adult millennial children challenged me to open my mind and heart to their gay and lesbian friends and to be hospitable to them; and I did so. In spending time with these people, I realised that their sexual identity is as natural to them as my ethnicity is to me. Just as I did not choose to be Chinese, neither did they choose to be gay or lesbian.

Following on, for my theology Masters dissertation in 2018, I decided to analyse the arguments deployed by Christians on same-sex marriage. I was challenged to re-evaluate the historic Christian understanding of sexuality that I had been taught, and with which I grew up. I sought to understand why some Christians and some church communities, who usually try their best to be welcoming, why they remain reluctant to include non-heterosexuals as full members of their communities, and to accord them the same civil rights as heterosexuals. The months spent in researching for the dissertation provided me the opportunity to think and write and pray my way through the theologies associated with LGBTIQ+ rejection and inclusion. It was a rich journey of political, social and theological discovery, and an acknowledgement of my previous ignorance and prejudice.

As I mentioned earlier, these Pastoral Principles were developed by the Church of England as a response to changing perspectives on gender, identity and sexuality, though they have much wider application. In 2020, the Church of England produced a 5-session course entitled *Living in Love & Faith*. Many churches in the UK have presented this course, and some churches in our Diocese, including La Côte, will do so as well, in coming months. I'm so pleased that the *Living in Love & Faith* course is available, giving some of us the opportunity to gather in a safe space to listen and relate to one another, to learn from one another and to disagree graciously and well with one another.

Let me finish here with the last three verses from today's passage from Romans: "May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant [us] to live in harmony with one another in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together [we] may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God." Amen