

A Call to Affirm Transgender People

Letter to the Most Revd Geoffrey Smith, Primate of the Anglican Church of Australia

6 October 2020

Dear Archbishop Geoff

As priests in good standing in the Anglican Church of Australia, with decades of faithful service, we write to you, as Primate, to implore you to take measures to affirm transgender people, and especially transgender Anglicans offering their ministries. Transgender people have for so long been repressed, face significant challenges, and currently endure a backlash on many fronts. As a couple, one of us transgender, we have just celebrated 35 years of fruitful Anglican marriage, and stand in the midst of much unnecessary conflict created by unloving actions by people of faith. In this we rejoice in our own licensed ordained ministries, which help to share light and healing with others, and to highlight the vital gifts of gender diverse people. Yet the burdens are great. We are thankful for the support of many colleagues. However we urgently need greater support from our Church, including active encouragement of transgender people themselves. Will you help lead the way? In particular, will you begin by reconsidering recent actions you have taken?

We are thankful for your gifts, and to have shared in ministry together with you over several years in the Anglican Church Southern Queensland. It is thus with personal sorrow and profound concern, that we must protest your handling of the application of the Revd Sorèl Coward for permission to officiate as a priest. We are shocked at the uninformed basis on which this appears to have taken place, and the confusion it is causing. We believe that, as Primate of the Anglican Church of Australia, your action has not only caused hurt to Sorèl and her wife, and distress to others. It has also endangered the very reception of matters related to sexually and gender diverse people which you purport to be defending, and made Anglican affirmation of transgender people more difficult. We ask therefore that you urgently revisit both your decision and the basis for it, and open up genuine conversations in the Anglican Church of Australia with gender and sexually diverse people, and with others with affirming experience of our lives.

We fully recognise your responsibility, as a diocesan bishop, to make determinations regarding applications for ministerial licences within your diocese. However we believe that natural justice does not appear to have been done. We are particularly stunned by your use of the term 'same-sex' to apply to Sorèl's marriage. This highly charged and misused designation does not reflect her or her wife's understanding of their marriage. Nor does it reflect our understanding of our own marriage, or others of our transgender friends. Best practice now recognises the complexity of human sexuality and gender, including making vital distinctions between terms such as "same-sex" and "same-gender", and between various forms of sexual identity and sexual expression, gender identity and gender expression. Yet, to legitimate refusing a licence, the phrase 'same-sex', with its emotive binary associations, has been used by you in an outdated clumsy manner. Thereby it risks establishing an unjust precedent which, as we see in hostile circles, is now being exploited against ourselves and others.

We ask, how this can do anything but damage transgender people? In November 2019, the Synod of the Diocese of Adelaide published an apology to LGBTIQ+ people, in which it recognised how it had, on previous occasions, through "words and behaviour", not displayed the love of God. The Synod promised to repent for such ungodly behaviour. The apology did not

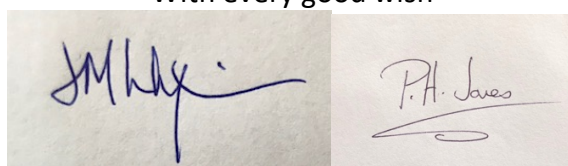
indicate *how* this repentance would be reflected in its responses to people like Mother Sorèl and her wife but it seems clear to us that it was certainly *not* intended to worsen relationships.

It seems to us that your handling of Mother Sorèl's application further muddies efforts to discern healthy Anglican understandings of sexuality and gender. For we are deeply troubled that a key implication of your decision seems to be that the lives of transgender people are now problematic for the Church. How does this sit with the explicit exclusion of transgender relationships from existing official national discussions of 'same sex relationships'? We, like so many Anglicans, were dismayed, for example, when the Doctrine Commission's work of *Same-Sex Marriage, Marriage and the Anglican Church of Australia* was put together and then published. With Equal Voices friends, we asked for involvement so that LGBTI, and other informed, voices might be included and heard. It remains outrageous that no affirming sexually and gender diverse Anglicans have been allowed to contribute, and we ask that you, as Primate, urgently address this deficit. In relation to transgender relationships, the Anglican Church of Australia is consequently still failing to hear our perspectives and learn from our experience and from those professionals with expertise who walk with transgender people. On what basis therefore are you making decisions? Why have you now included transgender relationships under this heading?

We wonder what such decision-making, and lack of consultation with transgender expertise, now means for Australian Anglican theological process. As you will be well aware, Anglican Method in theology requires attention to Reason as well as the very best scholarship on Scripture and Tradition. How, as Archbishop and Primate, are you therefore enabling the now very substantial corpus of transgender experience and professional peer agreed expertise to be shared? Do you affirm the now well-agreed affirming model of transgender care as the basis for theological engagement and pastoral practice? Over recent years our diocesan professional ethics training has specifically taught clergy and accredited church workers that the binary ideology of gender has long since been transcended. Yet your decision in the matter of Mother Sorèl lends credence to such outdated approaches. Ironically, in line with AUSPATH standards, Mother Sorèl herself is but one expert who might help yourself, the diocese of Adelaide, and the national Church, in growing in authentic understanding of the multi-dimensional nature of both gender and sexuality.

We ask you therefore to address these important issues we have outlined. For this is vital for transgender health and Anglican life today. As an ordained married couple, one of us of which is transgender, our recent experience of licensed ministry has been very positive, both in terms of enabling better understanding of gender identity, and also in enabling gender diverse people to grow healthily. The visibility of transgender people in Christian life is such a significant spiritual contribution to transgender flourishing. In contrast, excluding transgender people from ministry contributes to the often devastating levels of transgender pain which can be prevented. It drives a further wedge between Church and world, undermining Christian mission with increasing numbers of people. Why are you therefore refusing Sorèl and preventing the healing work she can assist with? How will you now enable support for transgender people in Church and society?

With every good wish



(The Revd Dr) Josephine Inkpin and (The Revd) Penny Jones