

Blessings discussion 24th May: Opening comments and survey results

To begin with, I'd like to just make some preliminary remarks, to set the scene for this discussion. **Disagreements in church life are nothing new** – they're there right from the earliest days of the church. The whole context of the book of Galatians that we're working through at the moment is of a major disagreement. Sometimes disagreements are solved easily; sometimes they aren't.

Our aim this evening isn't necessarily to get you to change your mind. But it is to help us all appreciate the nuances of this particular discussion more deeply, and to help each of us respond with greater compassion to those who identify as same-sex attracted, which includes some of us here. Our calling is to love one another, despite our differences. In this sort of discussion, it's easy to caricature people on one side as lacking compassion, and to caricature people on the other side as disregarding Scripture. But those sort of caricatures make it impossible to love one another properly. These evenings are about helping us go beyond caricatures and easy answers, to reach a greater level of mutual understanding and respect. Only then can we love each other as Christ calls us to. I'm daring to hope and pray our love for each other can actually increase despite of, or even because of, our differences.

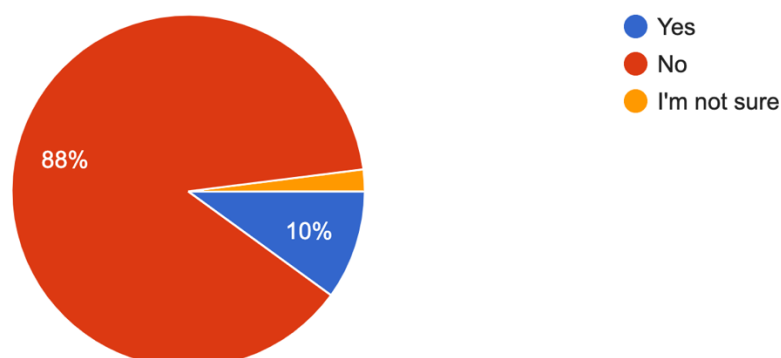
Why are we discussing this now? The Church of England, and the worldwide Anglican Communion have been discussing what a godly life looks like for someone who is attracted to members of the same sex for decades. We're not going to solve it in 2 evenings. What Lena and I say tonight will only scratch the surface of the debates. I hope some of you have been able to look at some of the resources we've suggested – and not just the ones that you know you'll probably agree with. For some people, this debate came out of the blue in February when General Synod made headlines. But the CofE has actually had a very structured process over the last few years called Living in Love and Faith. Parishes around the country have been invited to take part in a course which looks at some material around sex, relationships and identity. Sadly, it mostly coincided with the pandemic, and although a few people in our church did the course, we decided it wasn't the right time to run it here for everyone. We will listen to a couple of the stories from that course this evening.

In February, General Synod passed a motion that on the one hand gave the go ahead for finalising prayers of blessing for same sex couples, but also indicated there should be no change to the current doctrine on marriage. Due to the strength of feeling on this discussion on both sides, and the enormous amount of work that needs to be done before the next steps can be taken, there's now just going to be an update on progress at the next Synod in July – with the next main chunk of discussion scheduled for November.

Thank you to those who answered the anonymous survey. We've had 103 responses so far. Here are some of the results:

Do you identify as LGBTQ+?

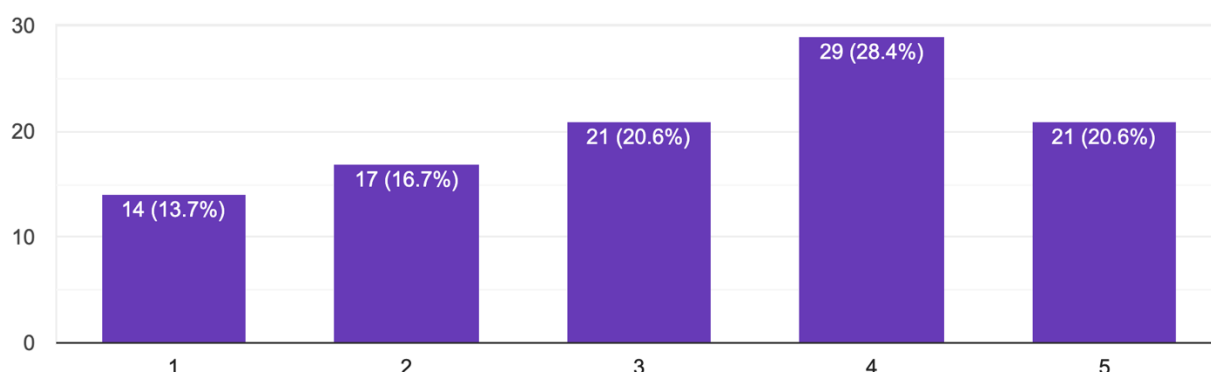
100 responses



Some of that 12% teenagers or young adults still trying to work out their sexuality. Some are much older people. So please assume some people in this room identify as LGBTQ+. Don't talk about them as somehow 'out there'. You are 'in here' and precious members of our community. Although we're only focussing on lesbian and gay relationships this evening (because that's what the Church of England is debating at the moment), these are obvious links to others who identify as one of the other letters in that acronym.

How 'close to home' is the topic of same-sex relationships for you, your family and friends?

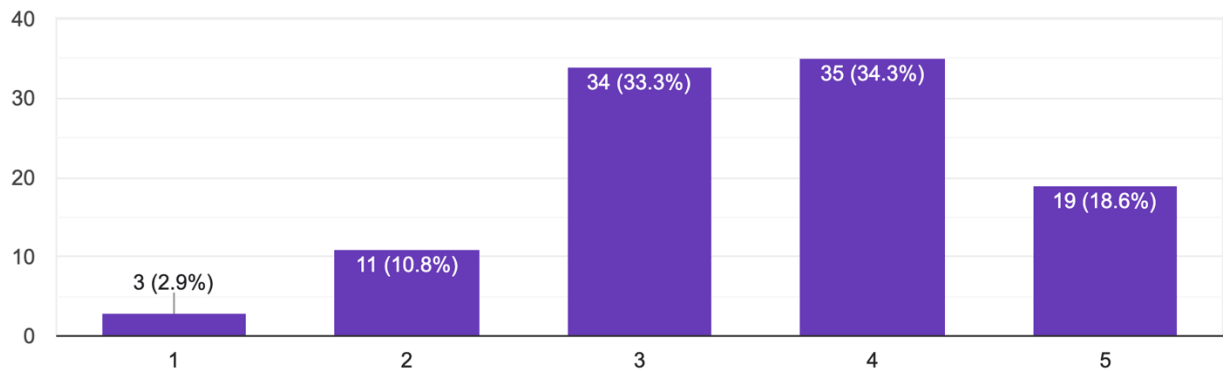
102 responses



So for almost half of us, this issue is close to home or very close to home. I've got people in my extended family who identify with one of those letters. I've spoken to a number of people in the congregation who have adult children who are gay or lesbian. Some feel able to talk about that quite openly; others don't. For many, it has been a painful family journey. Some of the stories I've heard have moved me to tears.

How strongly do you feel about the topic of blessing same-sex relationships (whether you're in favour or against)?

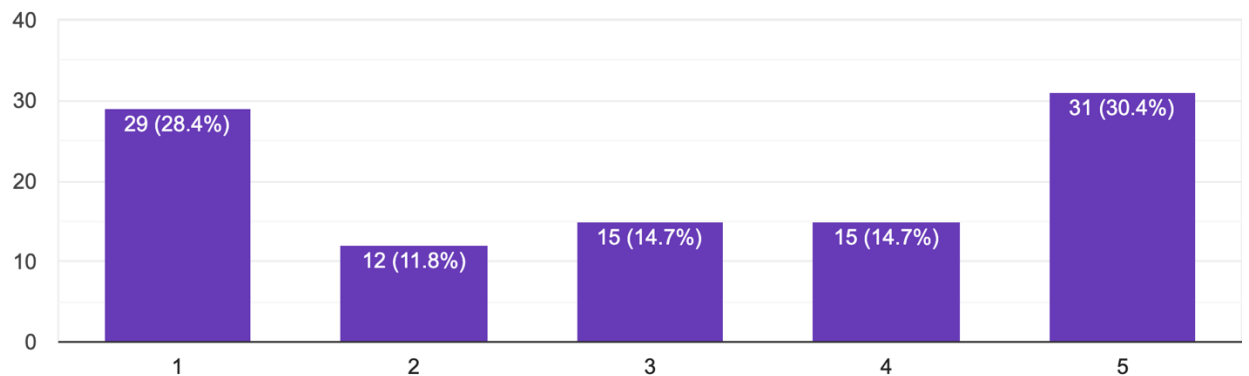
102 responses



Over half of us feel strongly about this, or very strongly. Having passionate opinions is good. But please, as James instructs us, "Be slow to speak and quick to listen." It's all very well getting our own point of view across, but better is to ask probing questions of others – not to win points or try to catch each other out – but to better understand where others are coming from and *why* they think differently to us.

How comfortable would you currently feel with blessings of same-sex relationships happening in church?

102 responses



How comfortable would you feel? 45% of those who responded would be in favour of blessing same-sex relationships here in St James'. 40% wouldn't be comfortable. Some are very unsure. So there are more who are in favour, but overall we're really quite split on this question. And please don't think this is just a generational thing, with younger generations in favour and older generations not in favour. That's true to a certain extent, but there are plenty of older people who are in favour, and plenty of younger people who aren't. So please don't make assumptions about what each other believe.

Now, the particular question we're looking at in the CoFE at the moment is about blessing same-sex relationships. But there are wider theological and pastoral questions about people who are gay or lesbian. We're just presenting two views this evening, but there are **many more views around**, and I want to try showing that briefly.

	A (most revisionist)	B	C	D	E (most traditionalist)
Do you think God planned for some people to have same-sex attractions?	Yes	Possibly	No	No	No
Is being attracted to the same sex sinful?	Absolutely not	No	No	No	Yes
Is sex between two same-sex Christians in a loving, monogamous, life-long relationship sinful?	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Should people with same-sex attractions pursue changing those attractions?	Absolutely not	Absolutely not	Absolutely not	Possibly	Definitely
What's 'God's best' for a Christian with same-sex attractions?	same sex marriage or celibacy	same sex marriage or celibacy	Celibacy	Celibacy	Change attraction then opposite sex marriage

You can see how each of those 5 points of view draw the line in different places. Now the point of putting that up is to help us see there's lots of different positions – and there's probably more that I haven't put up there. I'd come in at about C. Lena would come in about B. But there are Christian brothers and sisters who advocate A and others who say E. E is probably more common in parts of Africa like Uganda and Ghana – where homosexuality is criminalised – as well as in some Muslim countries and parts of the Indian sub-continent, and probably some of the American evangelical scene. But I want us to be really careful of just dismissing that point of view. That can easily slip into **cultural imperialism**, and that doesn't respect our Christian sisters and brothers in those places. If our views merely echo those of the culture we have been brought up in or live in, that is a warning sign to us that we may not be allowing Scripture to speak prophetically to us. We must allow Scripture to critique our own culture – affirming what is good and biblical, but speaking out against what is unbiblical. God has blessed us with increasing cultural diversity in our congregation – this is a gift to us, as those who are different to us can often see our cultural blind spots more easily. As we study Scripture together, we should *all* move from our 'home' culture to a more radical 'kingdom' culture.

One final introductory comment. **Remember who the real enemy is.** One of the 'devil's schemes' is to sow seeds of disunity in the church by getting us to think that people on the 'other side' of the discussion are the 'enemy'. We need to remember they're our sisters and brothers! – and that 'our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms' (Ephesians 6.11-12). Let's pray that we would be alert to the devil's schemes – he's as delighted by the subtle breaking down of Christian fellowship as he is by major division.