



## The Church of England: welcoming transgender people?

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### Introduction

The House of Bishops has decided that a new liturgy to mark the transition of a trans person is not needed (Media Centre, Church of England, 2018; Davies, 2018; Nye, 2018). This is despite the overwhelming support of General Synod in July last year to ‘consider preparing nationally commended liturgical materials to mark a person's gender transition’ (Church of England, 2017) – wording which, although logically leaving open the possibility of deciding *not* to introduce new liturgy, belies the support of Synod for Revd Chris Newlands’ motion, also known as ‘the Blackburn motion’, and the specific wording of the same, which sought to ensure:

that the Church of England engages *seriously* with the issue of providing the opportunity of a liturgical marking of a person’s transition which has the full authority of the Church of England, as an appropriate expression of community and pastoral support to trans people (Newlands, 2017) [emphasis added].

Instead, the House of Bishops have declared that a new liturgy is unnecessary, and that the existing baptism and confirmation services, or the *Affirmation of Baptismal Faith*<sup>1</sup> can be amended.

In a recent article in *Modern Believing* (Clucas, 2017) I discussed the situation of trans people in the Church of England within a framework of legal and institutional discrimination, explaining the impact of disadvantage and inequity for trans people as a minority group with regard to minority stress and microaggressions. I made a brief reference to important omissions for trans people in Church life, including the lack of official rituals and services to celebrate the significant events of trans people within the Church. It is this topic that I return to here, in more depth.

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<sup>1</sup> available here: <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/christian-initiation/rites-affirmation-appropriating-baptism#mm047> accessed 28/1/18.

## Background

If you are a member of Modern Church, or someone interested in the situation of trans people within the Church of England, you may already be aware that trans people's situation is not on a par with that of cis people. (For discussion of trans people's general experiences in Britain in 2017, see the recent Stonewall and YouGov report *LGBT in Britain: hate crime and discrimination* (Bachmann and Gooch, 2017)).

By 'trans people', I mean people whose gender identity is different in some way to the sex they were assigned, and gender they were assumed to be, at birth. On this definition, trans people may be binary-identified (e.g. a person assigned female at birth now identifies exclusively as male); nonbinary (e.g. a person assigned female at birth now identifies as outside the gender binary in some way, perhaps by moving between male and female identities, or disrupting the binary gender categories), or non-gendered (see e.g. (Elan-Cane, 2011)). 'Cis people' are people who are comfortable with the gender they were assigned at birth: statistically, that describes the vast majority of the readers of this article, and members of the Church of England.

Trans people are one of the categories of person named in Schedule 9 of the Equality Act 2010, in relation to whom the Church (and other bodies, for the purposes of an organised religion) is allowed to discriminate. The Church *may*, not must, discriminate with respect to employment, training, and promotion, when this is to comply with official doctrines of the religion (Equality Act 2010, Schedule 9, para. 2(5)), or 'to avoid conflicting with the strongly held religious convictions of a significant number of the religion's followers' (Equality Act 2010, Schedule 9, para. 2(6)). Examples of current discrimination include disadvantageously differential consideration of trans candidates for ordination; marginalisation of clergy who wish to transition in post; and 'conscience provisions' allowing a clergyperson to refuse to marry a person who they know or reasonably believe to be a trans person living in a different gender to that assigned at birth.

In addition to instances of discrimination by exclusion and differential treatment, trans people also experience significant discrimination by omission. There is a broader sense of omission, in which trans people (and lesbian, gay and bisexual people) are excluded from the Church's worldview. The way the institutional Church, and the vast majority of the people in it, see the world, is through a cisgender lens (in relation to lesbian, gay and bisexual people, this is a heteronormative lens – one that privileges heterosexuality). *Of course*, the world is divided into male and female, man and woman; how could it not be? This lens corresponds happily with the common (though inaccurate: see (Carlson, 2013)) recognition of two strict biological sexes, and our culture's construction of a sexual binary, conveniently mirrored in Genesis.

The second, narrower, sense of omission, which results from the first, is to do with a lack of rituals and services to celebrate significant life events of trans people, within the Church. Such omissions are impactful. Elizabeth Stuart writes that

...depriving people of language with which to make sense of their experience is a particularly effective way of keeping them silent and disempowered (Stuart, 1992, p. 10, cited in Mann, 2012, p. 77).

To not have a ritual, a service, to celebrate an important life event, keeps trans people in a position of disadvantage and disempowerment in the Church. I will return to this point in the context of the House of Bishops declaration shortly.

Returning to the first sense of omission, it is as difficult to overstate the importance of this cisgender lens as it is difficult to see without it if one conforms to the accepted binary (the same is true of the difficulty of seeing without a heterosexual lens if one conforms to the assumption of heterosexual normativity). The assumption – for it is an assumption, not a fact – that being cis is obviously the normal and natural (and only) way to be is at the root of trans people’s difficult experiences with cis normative people and institutions. And what is so difficult for so many trans people is the constant collision with cis normativity. This is not akin to meeting people who disagree with you about an important topic, and having regular discussions about it. This is like constantly meeting people who deny that it makes sense for you to have the view that you have; who may not even comprehend the intelligibility of having such a view; people who think it is their duty to disabuse you of your wrong-headedness, or at the very least, who are indifferent. Every repeated contact with this worldview is an assault, not just on the intellectual position of a trans person (though it is that also), but on a trans person’s very being.

On a personal level, each encounter of this type makes me die a little, inside. Recurring attacks of cis normativity require considerable energy on my part to maintain my sense of worth. I remain bruised, and sometimes bleeding; in overtly cis normative environments I never have the chance to heal completely. To make it possible for me to survive in hostile environments such as this I must erect defences, to keep the hurt at a distance; yet the reality is that repeated incursions on my sense of worth diminish it. I begin to understand myself as worth less than those who are cis.

The process I have described of experiencing assault and responding to this by devaluing myself is understood within psychology as experiencing *minority or marginalisation stress* (Meyer, 1995; for discussion, see Clucas, 2017, pp. 334–337). Marginalisation stress, with its concomitant increase in mental health issues among marginalised groups, is the result of living with stressful stigma, prejudice, and discrimination.

So much for the result. What of the cause? Living in a hostile environment means being on the receiving end of frequent *microaggressions*. Microaggressions are ways in which prejudice and discrimination are communicated in ostensibly innocuous interactions between people, and also experienced by people in discriminatory environments (Shelton and Delgado-Romero, 2011; Sue et al., 2007). Microaggressions are not restricted to trans people – they are experienced by other minorities – but there are microaggressions that are specific to trans people as trans people (Nadal et al., 2010, 2012). Some examples (drawing on Nadal et al.’s taxonomy of microaggressions, which is well worth reading in its own right) include:

- using the wrong (non-preferred) pronouns to describe an individual;
- refusing to use, or being careless about using, a trans person's preferred ('new') name;
- assuming that trans people are abnormal in some way (that they have a sexual pathology or mental illness or are particularly sinful);
- blaming the trans person for any prejudice they receive ('Well, what do you expect when you're like that?' Or 'You're the one who is violating Scripture');
- assuming that it is acceptable to ask personal questions about a trans person's history, or their body, just because they are trans;
- disclosing to others that X is trans without their permission; and barriers to official recognition of identity such as changing the gender marker on one's passport or birth certificate.

One of the difficulties with microaggressions – in detecting them, discussing them, and preventing their future occurrence – is that most microaggressions are relatively small events in themselves, issued by people who are well-meaning, and see their words and actions as either innocent or justified. Derald Wing Sue phrases this thus:

The experience of racial, gender and sexual-orientation microaggressions is not new to people of colour, women and LGBTs. It is the constant and continuing everyday reality of slights, insults, invalidations and indignities visited upon marginalized groups by well-intentioned, moral and decent family members, friends, neighbors, coworkers, students, teachers, clerks, waiters and waitresses, employers, health care professionals and educators. The power of microaggressions lies in their invisibility to the perpetrator, who is unaware that he or she has engaged in a behaviour that threatens and demeans the recipient of such a communication.

...the greatest harm to persons of colour, women and LGBTs does not come from ... conscious perpetrators ... but instead [from] well-intentioned people, who are strongly motivated by egalitarian values, believe in their own morality, and experience themselves as fair-minded and decent people who would never consciously discriminate. Because no one is immune from inheriting the biases of the society, all citizens are exposed to a conditioning process that imbues within them prejudices, stereotypes, and beliefs that lie outside their level of awareness. On a conscious level they may endorse egalitarian values, but on an unconscious level, they harbour antiminority feelings (Sue, 2010, preface).

To put this a different way for our purposes: the majority, seeing the world through a cisgender lens, experience the world and communicate through that cisgender framework, which results in promulgating the stereotypes and prejudices inherent in cisgender normativity. The pervasiveness of the assumption of cisgender normativity – that being cis is the natural, normal, and right (only) way to be – has deep roots that often contradict and circumvent the otherwise egalitarian values a person holds. 'A person' here does not mean the occasional person; it means *every* person growing up in a cisgender world. Cisgender

normativity infects all of us: the well-meaning; the ill-meaning; the indifferent; cis people; trans people; you, and me.

## The House of Bishops and no need for new liturgy

The decision not to recommend separate liturgy for welcoming trans people was initially announced by press release following a story in the Daily Mail (Petre, 2018). It has subsequently received some expansion in GS Misc. 1178, 'An update on "Welcoming Transgender People"' (Nye, 2018). Guidance on the use of the *Affirmation* will follow later this year (Nye, 2018, para. 8).

In the update, the House of Bishops says it

**welcomes and encourages the unconditional affirmation of trans people, equally with all people, within the Church, the body of Christ, and rejoices in the diversity of that one body, into which all Christians have been baptized by one Spirit** (Nye, 2018, para. 3) [emphasis in the original].

The welcome, and the forceful claim (in bold) to rejoice in the diversity of the body of Christ are superficially positive, but need further examination: does the House of Bishops walk the talk? This can only be judged against the document as a whole.

The reference to a welcome 'equally with all people' is interesting. This suggests that the House views a specific, separate welcome for trans people as something that would favour trans persons over non-trans people in an unjust manner.

A wish to treat people equally is commendable, but 'equal treatment' needs unpacking. If 'equal' is equated unproblematically with 'identical', then it misses the point. There are occasions where treating people identically is appropriate: if I have two children and wish to behave fairly towards them both, I am likely to give them equal sums of money for their birthdays, or presents of equal value. But if their life circumstances are very different – if one is able-bodied and capable of supporting themselves, and the other has a debilitating disability that prevents them working – I am likely to show my equal love for them in deliberately different treatment, devoting more time and/or money to the child that needs it more. The alternative, of rigidly identical treatment, would mean that my disabled child, though receiving identical treatment, remains in a disadvantaged position relative to the other. To give another example, suppose that I own a business whose premises are about to move from the first floor to the third floor of a building. I wish to treat my employees equally, and so all employees have the same means of access – a steep spiral staircase. This identical access will markedly disadvantage anyone with mobility issues, and make it impossible for anyone in a wheelchair to reach the workplace. It is identical treatment, but not equal in the sense of equitable, fair, or just.

In relation to this section, there are a number of possible interpretations. First, if the House of Bishops has indeed equated 'equal' with 'identical', then perhaps they do not understand that fairness often *requires* different treatment. Alternatively, perhaps they do understand this, but in their view, there is something about being trans that does not seem to require or deserve additional support in order to reach a position of parity. If the latter is the case,

then the House is sadly mistaken, for the reasons I have explained above. Or, perhaps a third option is better: that the House has not thought sufficiently about the experience of being a trans person in the Church. If this is the case, it is likely that any inability to comprehend the situation of a trans person in this environment was compounded by a lack of trans representation in the House of Bishops discussion. As Christina Beardsley notes in the section ‘no more talk about us without us’, ‘Not to attend to the voices of those directly affected is to objectify, problematise, and, often, patronise’ (Beardsley, 2018) – as well as to get it wrong.

The issue of the appropriateness of a separate rite is addressed in paragraph 4:

The motion also called on the House of Bishops to consider whether the recognition of a transgender person’s new identity was a moment which should be marked in a particular way in worship. After taking time to consider the issue prayerfully, the House would like to encourage ministers to respond to any such requests in a creative and sensitive way. If not already received, baptism and confirmation are the normative ways of marking a new or growing faith in Jesus Christ. If the enquirer is already baptized and confirmed, **the House notes that the Affirmation of Baptismal Faith, found in Common Worship, is an ideal liturgical rite which trans people can use to mark this moment of personal renewal** (Nye, 2018, para. 4) [emphasis in the original].

Again, there is enthusiastic use of bold type for emphasis that the *Affirmation* is ‘an ideal liturgical rite’. As in paragraph 3, an assertion is not the same as something actually being the case. I suggest that the only person who could claim any rite was ideal for them would be the individual themselves. Others might suggest a rite as suitable; to claim an objective ideal, in putting forward the opposite of what was eloquently argued and voted for at Synod last year, tastes of arrogance. To have considered the matter ‘prayerfully’ is not necessarily to have considered the matter adequately.

There is also no explanation of why, only assertion that, baptism and confirmation, or the *Affirmation* if already baptised and confirmed, is thought to be more appropriate than a new rite designed specifically for trans people.

Putting aside this lack of explanation, could it be the case that baptism/confirmation/affirmation are the best, or at least a decent option? My view is that these rites are unlikely to be pastorally appropriate in themselves, although they may become more appropriate, with the ‘creative and sensitive’ input of the priest concerned, for the following reasons.

An unbaptised trans person, wishing to make their baptismal vows, may have the advantage of being baptised in their new name (assuming that they have changed their name legally at this point). The service will certainly serve as a point of welcome for that person – but as a person making their baptismal vows, not as a trans person celebrating their new identity. Trans people who have already been baptised and/or confirmed are in a similar situation. Confirmation or affirmation are possible, and possible in their new name and identity, but this is not the same thing as a service specifically aimed at the watershed that is

acknowledging oneself publicly as trans, and living publicly in a gender and identity different to that assigned at birth.

The *Affirmation* (and baptism and confirmation) does, as the House claims, provide

[as] requested in the Diocesan Synod Motion, for ‘a liturgical marking of a person’s transition which has the full authority of the Church of England, as an appropriate expression of community and pastoral support’ (Nye, 2018, para. 5).

To have ‘the full authority of the Church of England’ was indeed part of the request in the Blackburn motion. The other part was for ‘a liturgical marking of a person’s transition’ – something that the House of Bishops have failed to provide, quite spectacularly, by their own admission. There is nothing in the rites of baptism, confirmation or affirmation that recognises or addresses transition. The best that can be said of them is that they may, without violence to the meaning of the service, include a person who has transitioned – but so may the funeral service. This does not make it an appropriate service for transition.

In the penultimate paragraph the House makes some attempt to justify their approach.

In inviting ministers to use this rite, the House wishes to point out that everyone’s Christian journey – like the journey to find one’s true identity – is unique and encourages ministers to treat these possible pastoral encounters accordingly. This approach, familiar to all who care for people during other major life events, takes into account each person’s unique experiences (Nye, 2018, para. 7).

Reference to finding one’s ‘true identity’ and ‘each person’s unique experiences’ gives some suggestion that the House comprehends the situation of the trans person. To me, this is unconvincing. Of course, every person’s experiences are unique – we are different people; it would be astonishing if our experiences were the same. Yet this facile phrase obscures the fact that the Church does accord significance to certain life experiences – at the very least, it does this for baptism, confirmation, confession, marriage, ordination, taking holy orders, healing, and dying. To say that no new rite is needed is to say that transition fails to satisfy some standard of significance that is met elsewhere.

A background note to the Blackburn motion, written by the Secretary General, provides some further detail about the legal issues concerning renaming:

The Church of England does not currently offer any liturgical provision for the ‘naming’ or ‘re-naming’ of an infant or any other person. There is no legal or doctrinal difficulty about a baptised transgendered person re-affirming their baptismal vows using a name different from the Christian name given at baptism. This is because whilst the Christian name given at baptism can only be changed formally in very limited circumstances – notably by the Bishop confirming the person concerned under a new name – a member of the Church of England may be known by, and use, different names from those given at baptism or confirmation provided that they do not do so for fraudulent or other similar purposes (Nye, 2017, para. 13).

The Church's position is similar to that of the secular law in that it is possible to use any name one chooses (provided there is no fraudulent purpose). This has, admittedly, become more difficult in secular society, as identity checks and formal systems limit the application of a chosen name: whilst you may prefer the name Jack or Jill, it is likely that your bank, employer, passport and other identity records and documents will use John or Gillian, the name on your birth certificate. What the law has, and the Church lacks (except in the case of confirmation in a new name by the Bishop) is the provision to change one's name. This is simply done by executing a deed poll or Statutory Declaration, proof of which enables one to change one's other identity documents. A person's 'real name' can change, and can do so multiple times.

This highlights an important and underdiscussed issue: a person's 'true name' in the Church can never be changed after confirmation. This is most likely to impact trans people (though not exclusively), and is formally unsatisfactory. Form matters in a symbolic sense, even if the everyday (secularly legal) name of a person is unopposed. A thorough attempt to really welcome trans people in the Church ought to have considered this issue and a means to resolve it. Not to do so is to perpetuate micro-aggressive barriers to official recognition of identity within the Church, that signify that a person's new identity and name is not their real one.

Individually and cumulatively, the *update* and the extract from *a background note* (Nye, 2018, 2017) evidence a pervasive cis normativity on the part of the House of Bishops in general, and perhaps the Secretary General in particular. If transness were really believed to be an equally valid and natural and important way of being, I doubt that this micro-aggressive failure to recognise and give recognition to trans people's transition would have occurred.

### Will baptism, confirmation, or affirmation meet a pastoral need?

It is quite possible that some trans people *will* be grateful for the acceptance signified by a Church-approved baptism, confirmation or affirmation. These services take part within one's church community, and this in itself is welcoming. For those who are glad not to be rejected and excluded – and for some trans people, this, in itself, is a wonderful thing – the baptism/confirmation/affirmation service may feel good enough. There is also the prospect that a 'creative and sensitive' response by a priest will enrich these liturgies further. Personally, though, trying to shoehorn the needs of transition into these pre-existing liturgies would not have satisfied me at the time of my transition, and does not seem satisfactory now.

Fortunately, there are liturgical resources available to celebrate transition. Some can be found in Justin Tanis' *Transgendered: Theology Ministry and Communities of Faith* (2003). Here is an extract from his Service of Renaming:

Minister:

We are here to affirm the name of \_\_\_\_\_.

This name symbolizes all that \_\_\_\_\_

Is and all that s/he is becoming, through the Grace of God.

We honour the name given to her/him

By her/his parents

And acknowledge that the time has come to

Declare a new name.

This name is the culmination of a journey of discovery

And, at the same time, its beginning (Tanis, 2003, p. 190).

Others resources for the trans person are available in Chris Dowd's and Christina Beardsley's forthcoming book, *Transfaith* (2018), an extract from which (A Liturgy for a Renaming Ceremony) has been made available ahead of publication here:

<https://www.booksonix.com/dlt/PressRelease/Transfaith%20liturgy%20sample.pdf> . This

last resource, coming 15 years after that of Tanis, explicitly recognises the possibility of nonbinary gender in the person whose renaming is being celebrated. In common with Tanis' liturgy, there is a recognition of movement from one name and gender identity to another, and the place of God in that becoming. This, I suggest, is what is needed in a rite that marks transition.

Although approval of the *Affirmation* etc., goes some way to resolving the disempowerment of trans people who have no rite (the point made by Stuart (1992), p. 10, cited in Mann, 2012, p. 77), it is somewhat unsatisfactory. Trans people's existence is recognised, yes; but on someone else's terms, not their own. This is half-hearted empowerment at best.

## Further thoughts

In co-opting the baptism rite as a trans person's welcome, it seems likely that the Church is attempting a compromise designed to placate the rejecting and accepting alike. Trans people have *a* ceremony to use, even if not the most appropriate or desired: they must be welcome, yes?

For the rejecting, those who believe a new liturgy would 'go against traditional Biblical teaching' (Nye, 2017, para. 4) and that 'gender re-alignment' is a 'fiction' (House of Bishops, 2003, para. 7; Nye, 2017, para. 9), the status quo remains: there is no new liturgy, and the rejecting may ignore the House of Bishops' encouragement for ministers to respond creatively and sensitively to trans people's requests (which might, on some interpretations, invite priests to make substantial additions or amendments to the liturgy). Aunt Cynthia and Uncle Cyril can pretend that their nephew John is still John, not their new niece, Jane, if they are not compelled to look at photographs or visit.<sup>2</sup>

If a deniable bespoke liturgy is what is intended by the House, then they abdicate their responsibility for leadership. They do so by potentially permitting the flourishing of substantial discretion in the shape of the service; not in an inconsequential way, as in giving a choice as to bible readings or hymns, but in allowing some creative and sensitive priests to

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<sup>2</sup> Though indications are that some ultra-conservatives are not willing to accept the welcoming of any trans people as trans people: see (Duffy, 2018).

design a liturgy that meets their congregant's transition needs – whilst other trans people, less fortunate in their priest, will have to settle for the shoehorn. This may be convenient for Church politics, but at the cost of the trans person involved.

If this understanding is correct, then a second abdication of responsibility also obtains. This moment in history provided a chance for the institutional Church to speak and act in favour of justice for trans people, not to appease those who hold to bigotry and prejudice, and perpetuate an already micro-aggressive environment.

## Concluding remarks

In this article, I have provided some background to the existing inequalities experienced by trans people in the Church, explaining in particular the pervasiveness of the cis normative lens – the view that it is natural, normal and right to be cis, rather than trans – and the existence and impact of microaggressions against trans people. In this context, I have discussed the House of Bishops decision not to recommend a separate liturgy, analysing its provisions and the implications of both decision and content. My conclusions were that the *update* (and also aspects of the *background note*) evidence a pervasive cis normativity that perpetuates a micro-aggressive environment for trans people in the Church of England. I doubt that the recommended services will meet the pastoral needs of a trans person at transition, and I have speculated that the failure to recommend a new liturgy is likely to be a political compromise that will not delight trans people, but also may upset those who regard trans existence as 'a fiction' less than would a new rite. If the decision of the House of Bishops is indeed a deliberate compromise, then I have also categorised it as an abdication of responsibility, in particular for the Church to act justly towards trans people.

Although I am critical of the recommendation, and have felt anger in response to it, my current attitude is one of sadness and resignation. I would have liked to inhabit an institutional church that believes I am wonderful because I exist; that accepts my truth as a truth worth valuing and celebrating; that recognises the prejudice that we all absorb, and helps me fight against it; that tells those who believe I am misguided, wrong, or mad, that *they* are the misguided ones, holding rigidly to their prejudice in the face of an overwhelming phenomenological, psychological and legal consensus that being trans is an unusual, but normal variation of being human. I would have liked to be aligned with a church that is brave enough to acknowledge that a new understanding of gender can be a Godly one, even if the secular world arrives there first. I would have liked to know an institutional church that truly practices the love that it preaches – or at least makes a better attempt at so doing. But the institutional Church of England was not this church when I was a member, and it is not this church now.

This church, I believe, is still possible. I appropriate Virginia Woolf's closing words about Shakespeare's sister, in *A Room of One's Own*:

I told you in the course of this paper that Shakespeare had a trans sister; but do not look for her [...] She died young – alas, she never wrote a word [...] Now my belief is that this trans poet who never wrote a word and was buried at the cross-roads still lives. She lives in you and in me, and in many other people who are not here tonight,

are too afraid to walk in public, or too worn out by the impact of injustice. But she lives; for great poets do not die; they need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh. This opportunity, as I think, is now coming within your power to give her.

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