



The Bristol Text to Reform
Bristol

4 October 2021

Plain English version

Introduction

For months we have been preparing The Bristol Text to Reform. It explains some of the discoveries we have made.

You can read it in easy and longer forms.

It's meant to reassure ordinary Catholics that we can make changes in the way we practise our faith without splitting with Catholic tradition.

The text has been written by sensitive and well-informed thinkers and theologians. Many of them are clergy.

It also suggests ways the Church should change so that it is more like Jesus.

The Bristol Text: 1. How the Church helps us think and behave as Christians

1.1 Things change with time

In the Gospels Jesus talks about a sower who sows a seed. But it's God who makes it grow. The Church needs to remember that it's God who makes things happen and that he does it in his own way. We can't decide on our own rules and then say that nothing can change. Instead, we should tell the world of the beautiful and challenging new things God does. Our faith needs to keep growing as we meet new situations and new people. We mature together as God's people.

1.2 We keep learning together

The church should help us to *think* rather than just telling us what to do. That's how we go on growing as Christians. We shouldn't try to be good because we are afraid: we should learn from each other how to be like Christ. The Good News is about joy and encouragement, patience, warmth and a welcome for everybody.

1.3 Looking at the Christian life as a whole

We call for the Church to be concerned with every part of life, and not to talk so much about sex. We should help everyone to find their special calling. There have always been people who live like Jesus, full of hope and love, seeing God in others, welcoming the stranger, loving their neighbours as themselves. They do not take advantage of anyone or hurt anyone. They look after the environment. This is what the Bible teaches – to show faith through love, to be fair and considerate, and 'to walk humbly with our God.'

The Bristol Text: 2. Who runs things in the Church

2.1 Treating everyone as an equal

Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God, which is very near. In it everyone is treated fairly and can live in freedom and peace. It means that the Catholic Church needs to be run in a way that treats everyone equally and fairly. Where there are complaints of abuse by the clergy, they need to be looked into by someone independent. The Church's laws should be updated thoroughly and often, so that they are a good model. They should be based on the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

2.2 Everyone should have a say, and agree on what is decided

The Catholic Church has said that anything that affects everyone should be discussed and agreed by everyone. Everyone who is baptized should be able to discuss and vote on whatever happens in the Church, including decisions on what the Church believes and should do. The way to unity is through love, not by making people afraid. It's not true that the Church is divided into those who are allowed to teach and those who must just listen. We all have a part in hearing what God is saying, not just a few. So, decisions should be made by councils that represent everyone.

2.3 Leaders should be elected by everyone

The Catholic Church has said that the people in charge should always be elected. Which means everyone should be asked for their opinion and listened to. Anyone should be able to apply for any position in the church, no matter what sex or race they are. Those who lead should have to keep everyone informed about what they are doing.

The Bristol Text: 3. The priesthood

3.1 Everyone who is baptised is clothed in Christ.

The Church says that we are all equal, which is something the Bible teaches. By 'all' we mean no matter what gender or how able someone may be. We must learn to be open to all, and especially to people not like ourselves. Jesus says, 'whoever wants to be first must be the last of all.'

3.2 The whole Church is God's community.

Jesus says, 'when two or three meet together in my name, there am I among them.' When Mass is said, it is everyone who is saying it, living and dead. Not just one person. Jesus made it easy to celebrate that he is with us, choosing a simple and everyday act of eating and drinking. So we don't need a priest to say Mass. St Peter says that all the baptised are 'royal priests.'

It follows from these that

3.3 Everyone can hear the Holy Spirit's call to serve.

God can call anyone to any role in the Church. All the baptised share in helping people hear God's particular call. We now know that, from its earliest days, Church services were led by women and men, whether single or married.

The Bristol Text: 4. Making everyone feel they belong

4.1 If too few people make all the decisions, too many beautiful people get left out

We need to welcome all kinds of different people, valuing the contribution everyone can make. This means changing the way the Church is run. It should not be governed by a few men.

4.2 People aren't just made male or female

Historically everyone has been understood as either male or female. We now know that things are much more complicated than that. But the Church has not kept up-to-date and has little to say that is now useful. Its teaching on sex and gender needs completely rethinking and updating often. Then it can offer help to people of all genders, and in all family situations.

4.3 Thinking again about who 'we' are

People who are gay, or who are not straightforwardly either male or female, find it extremely difficult to be Catholics. They are expected to say they agree with Catholic teaching about sexuality that doesn't make sense in their lives. It hurts not to tell the truth. We all need to see that we belong together with people who are different from ourselves, whether because of age, ability, gender, sexual preference, looks, colour or language. Then when we talk about God, everyone can be included.

4.4 Taking responsibility and saying sorry

The Church needs to accept responsibility for the ways in which it has hurt people who have been seen as different. The Lord said to Cain after he had killed his brother Abel, 'your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground.' It shows that we need to accept responsibility for what we have done, and then put things right. We need to make it clear to everyone that we are all equal. Then the Church can work with its victims to find ways of saying sorry for the harm it has done.

The Bristol Text: 5. Contributors

Dr Kochurani Abraham

Indian feminist theologian, researcher, writer, and trainer on issues related to gender, sexuality, spirituality, and ecology. Dr Abraham is currently Vice President of the Indian Theological Association and is active in the Indian Women Theologians' Forum. She is author of *Persisting Patriarchy: Intersectionalities, Negotiations, Subversions*.

Dr James Alison

Catholic theologian, priest, and author, Dr Alison has a mission to bring the work of French historian and polymath Rene Girard to a wider public. His books include *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay*. He is known for his pastoral outreach in the LGBTQ+ community.

Ruby Almeida

Born in Jodhpur, India, Ruby was brought up with an Almeida identity that was both strongly Catholic and Indian from an early age. After moving to England and attending a Catholic school she embarked on a decades long career in the media industry. This included making documentaries for the Indian Space Organisation; working primarily with the community sector, NGOs and colleges in India under her own video production company; and being Senior Lecturer in Film and Broadcast at London Metropolitan University. Ruby has worked for many years on LGBTQ+ rights. She was Chair of Quest for 8 years and is the Co-Chair of the Global Network of Rainbow Catholics. She set up Rainbow Catholic India and Bridge and Embrace, the first LGBT groups in India; and is on the LGBT+ Catholics Westminster Pastoral Council. Ruby works for Landings, a programme to support baptised Catholics, who, once distanced from their faith, now wish to return to it.

Dr Luca Badini Confalonieri

Director of Research at the Wijngaards Institute, Luca Badini has a special interest in the governance of the Roman Catholic Church, and is author of *Democracy in the Christian Church – A Historical, Theological and Political Case*. He is also the lead author of the report 'Christian Objections to Same Sex Relationships: An Academic Assessment', and its accompanying 'Academic Statement on the Ethics of Free and Faithful Same-Sex Relationships', which have achieved substantial international media coverage recently.

Professor Tina Beattie

Emerita Professor of Catholic Studies at the University of Roehampton, Tina Beattie is an independent researcher and writer, one of the familiar voices on *Thought for the Day* on BBC Radio 4. She is also Director of Catherine of Siena College, at the University of Roehampton, offering online courses in theology, gender and social justice. In addition to her many academic publications, Tina is the author of a novel *The Good Priest*. A second novel *Between Two Rivers* is due for publication later this year. Her academic and media interests are in the areas of sacramentality, mysticism, gender and psychoanalytic theories of desire; Marian theology and devotion; theology and art, and women's sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Revd Anthony Cassidy

Parochial Administrator at St Matthew's Catholic Church in West Norwood, London, Tony Cassidy trained in biblical studies at the Biblical Institute in Rome, although most of his theological studies were in mixed-sex classes at the University of Kent at Canterbury. It was an experience of education which he says was 'not typical of many (or most) of my clerical brethren'. He has a special interest in 'creeping infallibility' something about which he says, 'we should all be aware'.

Dr Nontando Hadebe

A woman theologian based in Johannesburg, South Africa, Dr Hadebe has recently been appointed as International Co-ordinator for Side by Side: Faith Movement for Gender Justice. Her membership includes The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, Future Church and Catholic Women Speak/Preach. She hosts a weekly radio program on Radio Veritas; facilitates an ecumenical programme with Fellowship of Christian Councils in South Africa that brings church leaders into dialogue with LGBTQ+ persons. She's co-editor of *A Time like No Other: Covid-19 in Women's Voices*.

Dr Martha Heizer

Educationalist and psychologist at the University of Innsbruck, Dr Heizer's special interest is in Feminist Theology. She was co-founder of the Austrian Kirchenvolks-Begehren, the initiative which led to the establishment of We Are Church International and has been Chair of We are Church - Austria since 2014. She and her husband also received notice of excommunication from the Archdiocese of Innsbruck in 2014.

Dr Claire Jenkins

A trans woman and convert to the Catholic Church, Dr Jenkins was married with four children until in 1999 she transitioned from male to female, aged 50. Prior to this Claire was a deputy headteacher of a secondary school. She has a PhD from the University of Sheffield. Her research was into the effect of transitioning on the family members of transsexual people. She has advised a number of research projects; and spoken at Catholic and university conferences. Currently she is actively involved in the pastoral care to LGBTQ+ Catholics where she co-ordinates a team (lay and ordained) within her diocese. She also gives ongoing support to LGBTQ+ Muslim asylum seekers and refugees some of whom have become her close friends. She belongs to a small working party advising the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales on transgender issues. In May 2020 Claire was awarded a Senior Fellowship at Margaret Beaufort Institute, Cambridge, where she is researching Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming (TGNC) young people in schools.

Baronnes Helena Kennedy QC

Helena Kennedy is one of Britain's most distinguished lawyers and a Labour peer, renowned for championing civil liberties and promoting human rights. She has published two books on how the justice system is failing women. Helena is the founding force behind the establishment of the Bonavero Institute of Human Rights at the University of Oxford. She is currently Director of the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute, directing the Institute's work in upholding the rule of law and human rights globally.

Kate McElwee

Kate McElwee is Executive Director of the Women's Ordination Conference (WOC), the oldest and largest organisation working to ordain women as deacons, priests, and bishops into an inclusive and accountable Roman Catholic Church. WOC is a grassroots movement that promotes activism, dialogue, and prayerful witness to call for women's full equality in the Church. Kate, recently based in Rome, has an MA in International Human Rights from SOAS (London) and is also a member of the leadership circle of Women's Ordination Worldwide

Gina Menzies

Gina Menzies is B BD from the Milltown Institute, Dublin with post graduate studies in Feminism and Moral Theology. She also has an MSc in Ethics and Law from the Royal College of Surgeons, Dublin, where she currently lectures in Healthcare Ethics. She served as Chair of the Irish Government Taskforce on Women in Sport and is a frequent guest on the Irish Broadcaster RTE

Professor Thomas O'Loughlin

Professor Emeritus of Historical Theology at the University of Nottingham, Professor O'Loughlin is Director of *Studia Traditionis Theologiae*. He is a presbyter of the Catholic Diocese of Arundel and Brighton. A sought-after speaker, Tom is the author of *Eating Together, Becoming One*, and *The Rites and Wrongs of Liturgy - Why Good Liturgy Matters*, amongst others.

Dr John O'Loughlin Kennedy

Dr O'Loughlin Kennedy is a retired economist, 'serial social entrepreneur', and author. His book *The Curia is the Pope*, examines what he calls the 'self-serving bureaucracy that manages the Pope and controls access to him'. He proposes some remedies for the problems which he says the Church, as currently managed, is chronically unable to deal with.

Revd Diarmuid O'Murchu

Diarmaid O'Murchu is a member of the Sacred Heart Missionary Order, a social psychologist, and an author. A graduate of Trinity College Dublin, most of his working life has been spent in social ministry in London, most recently with homeless people and refugees. His latest book is *Doing Theology in an Evolutionary Way*.

Revd Christina Rees CBE

Writer, broadcaster, and practical theologian, specializing in women and religion, Christina Rees was a leading campaigner and spokeswoman for women bishops and Chair of WATCH (Women and the Church) for over 13 years. She was a lay member of the Church of England's General Synod for 25 years and a founder member of the Archbishops' Council, the body that advises the Archbishops of Canterbury and York on matters of policy and resources. She has sat on numerous national church committees and is an Honorary Fellow of Ripon College Cuddesdon, a leading Anglican theological college. In 2016 she was made CBE for services to the Church of England. She is a school chaplain and was ordained in September 2021.

Dr Patricia Rumsey

Abbess of a Poor Clare Monastery, Dr Rumsey has a PhD in Historical Theology. Her areas of expertise include the history of religious life for women and the history and spirituality of the Franciscan Order. She is the author of *Lest She Pollute the Sanctuary* in which she examines the perception of women in Christianity through the centuries.

Virginia Saldhana

Virginia Saldhana is a woman activist, writer, and theologian, living in Mumbai, India. She is the founder member of the Indian Women Theologians Forum and was executive secretary of the Commission for Women in the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India and Secretary of the Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) Women's Desk/Office of Laity & Family. She has campaigned to bring attention to abuse of women within the Catholic Church.

Kathleen Gibbons Schuck

Kathleen Gibbons Schuck serves on the pastoral team at the intentional community of St Mary Magdalene in south-eastern Pennsylvania. She has been a member of Roman Catholic Women Priests (RCWP) since 2015. Kathleen was previously Director of International Marketing for the Sisters of the Holy Child, raising awareness and funds to build a clinic and organic farm in West Africa.