

Section A		
Institution: Durham University		
Unit of Assessment: 31, Theology and Religious Studies		
Title of case study: Same-Sex Relationships and the Churches		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: Between 2000 and 2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Robert Song (case study lead)	Professor	1999-present
Christopher Cook	Professor	2005-present
Mike Higton	Professor	2013-present
Walter Moberly	Professor	1985-present
Simon Oliver	Professor	2015-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: Between December 2013 & December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
Section B		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>The question of same-sex relationships and equal marriage has been heavily disputed in Christian churches worldwide, with rancorous debates highly polarised between conservatives and liberals, leading to potential or actual formal divisions in churches. Research undertaken at Durham University influenced church debates via its academic staff producing key research and participating at length in policy-making processes. The impact includes the role of Robert Song's <i>Covenant and Calling</i> in contributing to the Church of Scotland's formal change of position on same-sex marriage, as well as to policy changes in other churches, together with the contribution of several members of staff to the Church of England's Living in Love and Faith process.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>(i) <u>Context</u>: Questions arising about same-sex relationships and the churches' attitudes towards LGBTI+ people have been amongst the most vexatious for all churches in the past two or three decades, most overtly, though not exclusively, for mainstream Protestant denominations. Debates are highly polarised between conservatives and liberals (though many dislike this characterisation of the positions); and in many cases this has led to potential or actual formal divisions in churches, with much bitterness and rancour as a result. This is not just a Western phenomenon: some of the most protracted disputes (e.g. in the Anglican Communion) are conducted at a global level.</p>		
<p>(ii) <u>Research by Robert Song</u>: Song's research was initially stimulated by an invitation in 2012 to be a theological adviser to the House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality (the Pilling Group), to advise the Church of England House of Bishops about how to take forward issues for the Church connected with same-sex relationships (Pilling report published November 2013). Arising from this he published <i>Covenant and Calling: Towards a Theology of Same-Sex Relationships</i> (2014) [R1], based on research conducted between 2012 and 2014. This proposed a new way of thinking theologically about same-sex relationships that makes</p>		

central the significance of eschatology for Christian sexual ethics, which has usually concentrated almost entirely on a theology of creation as the normative framework for thinking about sexuality. It weaves together a number of claims: (i) that the Bible and Christian tradition's fundamental anxiety about same-sex relationships has been that they are non-procreative, not that they are same-sex; (ii) that for Christians, procreation is no longer essential to their identity in Christ; (iii) that the moral acceptability of contraception for most Protestant denominations removes the intrinsic connection between sex and bearing children; (iv) that this opens the way to the theological category of 'covenant partnerships', i.e. permanent, faithful sexual relationships which need not be heterosexual. The argument has been widely recognised as fresh/original, even amongst those who are not inclined to be sympathetic to its conclusions. Even though it is intended as a substantial contribution to the debate and is not an overview or introduction, *Covenant and Calling* was written at a relatively short and accessible level in order to maximise leverage for impact purposes. In a second, forthcoming monograph, Song will be exploring the idea that covenant partnerships should be identified with marriage, eschatologically understood.

(iii) Research by Christopher Cook: While it is often claimed that Christian debates about human sexuality arise from differences over the authority of Scripture, Cook argues that they might be better understood as debates about science and theology. His 2018 article [R2] arises out of research conducted in related areas over many years, and sums up an argument which he had presented in a variety of public engagement contexts (e.g. in three *Church Times* articles in 2014, 2016, and 2018; a 2016 public conference on Science and Theology in Human Sexuality co-organised by Cook and Song, a 2017 Church of England General Synod fringe meeting, etc.).

(iv) Research by Mike Higton, Walter Moberly, and Simon Oliver: Higton, Moberly and Oliver's membership of the Living in Love and Faith process (see below) is based on their general subject expertise; examples of this in relation to sexuality are Moberly's 2000 article which criticises simplistic uses of Scripture in church debates about homosexuality [R3], and Higton's 2020 book, which explores the nature of theological method in the Church of England [R4].

3. References to the research

[R1] Robert Song, *Covenant and Calling: Towards a Theology of Same-Sex Relationships* (London: SCM Press, 2014).

[R2] Christopher C. H. Cook, 'Science and Theology in Human Sexuality', *Theology and Sexuality* (2018) <https://doi.org/10.1080/13558358.2018.1459082>.

[R3] Walter Moberly, 'The Use of Scripture in Contemporary Debate about Homosexuality', *Theology* 103, no. 814 (2000), 251-8. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X0010300403>

[R4] Mike Higton, *The Life of Christian Doctrine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

Evidence of quality

Reviews of R1 include C. C. H. Roberts, *Studies in Christian Ethics* ('within the revisionist genre, [R1] shoots to the head of the class'); Theo Hobson, *Times Literary Supplement* ('a surprisingly nuanced contribution to the debate, maybe even a fresh perspective on the dilemma facing the Churches'); Oliver O'Donovan, *INTAMS Journal* ('Among so many contributions to a fractiously vexed topic, it stands out by offering us something new to think about, a way of conceiving same-sex relations that is not current coinage. If its proposal were the object of careful reflection from all sides, a disagreement currently marked as much by predictability as by bad temper could take a step forward. And for this reason alone the book deserves careful attention'). R1 has been the subject of several extended discussions in PhDs and books, in some cases of chapter length (cf. A. Goddard in T. Noble et al. *Marriage, Family*

and Relationships (2017); S. Cornwall, *Un/familiar Theology* (2017); S. Schafer, *Marriage, Sex and Procreation* (2019)). Song has given 9 papers based on R1 in UK and international settings; also a panel on it was held at the Society of Christian Ethics (New Orleans, 2018). All outputs (R1 to R4) were subject to rigorous peer review, and published either in leading journals, or with highly regarded publishers.

4. Details of the impact

Research at Durham University has improved the quality of the conversation between different parties on the question of same-sex relationships and equal marriage and has enabled these debates to move forward more constructively. Principal beneficiaries include the Church of Scotland, the Scottish Episcopal Church, and the Church of England. Wider public engagement with the research insights generated has also benefitted a broader audience of people with an interest in the debate about same-sex relationships and equal marriage.

[A] Church of Scotland

The Church of Scotland has been debating sexuality for several years. Perhaps the most important debate paving the way to grant individual ministers and deacons the authority to preside at same-sex marriages was held at its General Assembly in May 2017. Song's book was extensively cited in the Theological Forum's report [E1], which was the basis for the debate: the book is described as containing 'the most perceptive theological move in the literature to date', and two of the nine text pages of the report are given to discussing it.

Introducing the debate at the General Assembly, the Very Revd Professor Iain Torrance, Convenor of the Theological Forum, reported: 'Now, there is a lot of stuff out there in the literature, claiming to be a theology of same-sex marriage. Actually most of it is about justice or some analogy or another. Now out of this we chose to lift up the approach taken by Professor Robert Song of Durham University because his approach is different, and actually much more because his approach actually resonates with the profound change we as a church underwent over the ordination of women, and because it is fundamentally very simple and it flows from Christology.' Continuing, he said: 'After much discussion the Forum saw this as one of those historic turning-points where a deepening occurs in our theological thinking, where suddenly, perhaps unexpectedly, the pieces of a long argument come together in a different way' [E2].

In the three-hour debate R1 was referenced or quoted by many speakers, a number of whom were clutching copies of it. Amongst the mentions of the book, one speaker described it as 'a gamechanger of historic significance' [E2, with further details]. The debate was won by 70% to 30% [E3, E4]. As a result, drafting is being undertaken to overcome the final legal obstacles to Church of Scotland ministers and deacons presiding at same-sex marriages.

[B] Scottish Episcopal Church

The Scottish Episcopal Church has also been debating issues of sexuality for several years. In 2015 its Doctrine Committee published a report on the Theology of Marriage [E5], written to provide a theological basis for a discussion of whether the Church's theology could be developed, in accordance with Scripture, tradition and reason, to include marriage of persons of the same sex within the Church's life. Song's book was cited or quoted in the report in several places and discussed favourably at the culmination of the argument ('[Song's] approach would give a unified theological account of marriage and covenant partnership, showing how a creation ordinance is taken up and fulfilled eschatologically, without losing its grounding in creation'). The report was warmly received at the General Synod of June 2015 (103-17 in favour), of whose decision it was reported that 'Professor Song's book was crucial in ushering in a new imagination' [E4]. The same Synod agreed to begin a process of change in relation to its canon on marriage, a change that was finally agreed in June 2017 [E6].

[C] Church of England

The House of Bishops' document, *Issues in Human Sexuality* (1991), stood as the most recent formal statement by the Church of England on same-sex relationships for over two decades, until the Pilling Report (2013) [E7], for which Song was a theological adviser. One eventual result of that report was the setting up of the interdisciplinary Living in Love and Faith process in 2017, designed to produce a formal episcopal teaching document on sexuality: Cook, Higton, Moberly and Oliver have all been core members of its working groups.

(i) Song's contributions

Song made a significant contribution to the Pilling Group's work and final report [E4]. He gave a paper based on his book and led a discussion on 'Holiness and Sexuality' in a private meeting of the Archbishop of Canterbury's theological retreat group in December 2015, in which Higton also participated. In recognition of being a 'highly experienced theologian' in the area, he was also invited by Lambeth Palace to provide a plenary contribution to a closed meeting of General Synod as part of its process of Shared Conversations in July 2016 [E8]. Other non-official contributions by Song to Church of England debates include being asked to provide the initial draft of an 'Open Letter to the Evangelical Group on General Synod' (January 2017).

(ii) Science, theology, and sexuality (Cook and Song)

Following concerns raised by the Royal College of Psychiatrists (RCPsych) about the Pilling Report's treatment of the science of sexuality, Cook and Song organised a public conference on Science, Theology and Human Sexuality at Durham in September 2016, at which Cook presented an initial version of his paper. As a result, Cook and Song were invited to help organise and speak at a General Synod fringe meeting in February 2017, which Song chaired, and at which both Cook and the President of the RCPsych gave presentations [E9]. Song also co-authored (with Professor Michael King, Department of Psychiatry, UCL) a briefing note on the science of conversion therapy, distributed to all members of General Synod (June 2017) prior to its debate on the subject. Based in good part on the scientific evidence, which had in part been brought to Synod's attention by Cook and Song, Synod passed a motion banning conversion therapy, as a result of which the Church called on the UK government to ban the practice [E9]. Subsequently the UK Government's LGBT Action Plan 2018 pledged 'to end the practice of conversion therapy in the UK'.

(iii) Living in Love and Faith (LLF) (Cook, Higton, Moberly, and Oliver)

The Living in Love and Faith process has been of a scope and complexity that has been judged to 'rank with anything produced by the Church since Tudor times' [E10]. Cook, Higton, Moberly and Oliver have all been core members of its thematic working groups and interdisciplinary groups. Each was invited because of their known subject expertise in their respective areas, specimen evidence of which in the case of Cook, Higton and Moberly is given by the publications listed above [R2, R3, R4]. They have each contributed scholarly papers from within their own disciplines and have participated in the drafting of planned outputs from the project, including the core book publication.

Feedback from the College of Bishops meeting in September 2018 indicates that Cook's seminar on sexual orientation at that meeting had impact on bishops' knowledge and attitudes: his work 'challenged the [LLF] project team to take interdisciplinary approaches seriously' [E10]. Moberly's contribution to debate within the Biblical Studies Working Group set out the framework within which opposing biblical views on sexuality were understood by all the other groups. Within the Theology and Ethics Working Group, Oliver drafted a significant proportion of the theological material for the core book. While all four Durham

participants played a major part in LLF, Higton's role was especially noteworthy. Drawing directly on material that has now been published in R4, he wrote seven working papers for the Theology and Ethics Working Group, which formed the basis for the 'method' section, one of three sections of the core book. He was then one of two main authors responsible for successive drafts of the method section itself. Following this he was the main author of the first full draft of the whole book, and then collaborated in the small group responsible for the many subsequent redrafts.

The Durham contribution has been confirmed by the Rt Revd Dr Christopher Cocksworth, Chair of the Co-ordinating Group, who writes that '[a]mong the several universities represented by academics taking part in the LLF project, Durham was the most generous both in quantity of time given and in quality of combined contribution ... Together they played a vital role in setting the tone of our endeavours' [E10]; and by the Chair of the House of Laity of General Synod, who writes that 'Durham academics have made an extraordinary contribution to the LLF work' [E10].

[D] Improving wider debate amongst Christians

Song's work has reached audiences outside of formal church structures. Through a public engagement programme, he has been involved in 27 public events, including to approximately 1,500 to 2,000 people at Greenbelt (a Christian arts festival) in 2014, the Nomad Podcast, and national and local church events. The *Shored Fragments* blog, run by a Baptist theologian and minister, described R1 as "an exceptionally good book, which needs to be read, and is worth disagreeing with... Song's book is now for me the go-to defence of the alternative line of creating a discipline that is not marriage to make space for same-sex couples".

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- [E1] 'An Approach to the Theology of Same-Sex Marriage', Church of Scotland Theological Forum report, May 2017 (accessed 10/4/19).
- [E2] Church of Scotland General Assembly, debate on Report of the Theological Forum, 25 May 2017, webcast (accessed 10/4/19).
- [E3] 'Assembly agrees apology to gay people and accepts same sex marriage report' (Church of Scotland news report, 25 May 2017 (accessed 10/4/19))
- [E4] Statements of corroboration from the Very Revd Professor Sir Iain Torrance, and Sir Joseph Pilling (Chair of the House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality).
- [E5] Report on the Theology of Marriage by the Scottish Episcopal Church Doctrine Committee, 2015.
- [E6] Scottish Episcopal Church announcement on Canon of Marriage (accessed 10/4/19).
- [E7] *Report of the House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality* [the Pilling Report] (London: Church House Publishing, 2013).
- [E8] Invitation from Lambeth Palace to Song to speak to General Synod (6 May 2016).
- [E9] A note is provided here which corroborates the impact of Cook and Song's work on the General Synod vote on Gay Conversion Therapy.
- [E10] Statements of corroboration from the Rt Revd Christopher Cocksworth (Chair, Co-ordinating Group, Living in Love and Faith), and Dr Jamie Harrison (Lay Chair of General Synod).