

ST ALBANS DIOCESAN SYNOD

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#liedentity – who you are is more than how you look

Some background information

60% of girls opt-out of everyday activities because of how they think they look. Around half of adolescent boys are unhappy with their bodies. (Statistics via UWE/Dove research).

The Children's Society Good Childhood Report 2016 tells us that young people's happiness is at its lowest since 2010. Increasingly, many young people are sourcing their identities from social media and advertising, and in the process losing their self-esteem. This key findings from this wellbeing research tells us that

- Pressure to fit in with society's expectations is making children unhappy
- Alarming numbers of children are self-harming
- Non-stop comments about appearance are harmful to girls' well-being
- Outdated gender stereotypes are damaging to boys' and girls' happiness
- Family relationships are particularly important for girls

The Right Reverend Rachel Treweek, Bishop of Gloucester, hosted a conference in February 2018 based on this research and the hashtag liedentity. In her introduction Bishop Rachel said, "Over the last couple of years I have been speaking publically about this issue and promoting the message that who you are, is more than how you look. I launched a social media campaign #liedentity with pupils from All Saints Academy in Cheltenham, challenging negative body image and encouraging young people to look within to discover true value and beauty. This has given me a great opportunity to speak with young people about my own identity in Christ and my desire for every person to discover their worth and potential as a unique individual created in the image of God. We are bombarded with messages of what the 'perfect body image' is, and for many this undermines true identity. We know that for these young people having negative thoughts about how they look can impact on their entire life, causing deep unhappiness and contributing to poor mental health."

Bishop Rachel in her contribution to the Good Childhood Report goes on to remind us all that:

"Magazines and social media bombard girls with messages about hair, makeup and clothes. In themselves these things are not inherently evil, but the implicit message is all too often that certain products bring happiness. Words like 'perfect' and 'flawless' frequently appear in messages about makeup; and hashtags such as #wokeuplikethis #beautifulgirl and #fotd (face of the day) are all about appearance. Girls are affirmed or discouraged by how many 'likes' their photos receive, whilst female celebrities are

often presented as successful, desirable and worthy of intimate relationship because of their outward appearance.

Alongside all of this, we also live in a society where so many children suffer from obesity. Whilst we know obesity leads to greater health risks, the way we talk about obesity is more often focused on external appearance rather than health and flourishing. When children are chastised for eating too much, they are usually warned that 'it will make you fat'. The message becomes focused on body shape when the real issue is health. The reason for not eating the second doughnut is not because it will make you fat and therefore ugly, but because it is not positively contributing to your health. Our messages about eating and exercise need to focus much more on well-being and loving one's self rather than one's appearance. Every child, made in God's image, naturally wants to be loved and to give love. It is imperative that none of us collude with any message that says perfect love is bound up with outward appearance."

For each of us, we need to take time to reflect on how we as the body of Christ can respond to and challenge the society that we are creating. We need each to take care with what we say and what we ask so that our emphasis on conversation with between adults and girls is not just about external appearance – "You look great - I do like your top" or "who did your hair?" but about internal character and inner being. How do we affirm every child and young person as a whole person and speak to that inner being? How do we inspire and challenge children and young people so that we are encouraging their flourishing and development to become who God calls them to be? How do we work to develop a true understanding that our bodies and appearance say something about us rather than define our identity? The shape of who we are becoming begins within us and our interaction with young people needs to be intentional about nurturing and validating their identity at the core of their being.

'Say1thing' is an initiative as part of the Liedentity campaign, which asks the simple question; "What do you value about your best mate? #Say1Thing". It has been used to encourage all people on social media to post a picture of their friends or family and share one thing they value about that person with the hashtag #Say1thing. Perhaps our challenge should be to make sure that we Say1thing each and every day to our friends and family and the young people we meet?