

LLF: Recent Past, Present & Future – Part One

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Shortly before General Synod, in the light of what I had [earlier written](#) at the start of the discernment process concerning what was needed from the bishops and possible ways forward, [I argued](#) for a pause rather than a rush to judgment in the form of a vote. This did not happen and now, a month on from the marathon debate spread over two days (and able to viewed [here](#) and [here](#)) and with a meeting of the College of Bishops imminent on Thursday 23rd March, it is perhaps good to take stock on where we are in three parts:

- 1. Look back at what the bishops proposed and their original motion (passed with one amendment by 250 members for to 181 against and with 10 abstentions, though only just in the House of Laity where the vote was basically 52/48) and the reception of it particularly in the light of the voting in Synod.*
- 2. Look at some key theological and legal issues particularly given the Cornes amendment (to “endorse the decision of the College and the House of Bishops not to propose any change to the doctrine of marriage, and their intention that the final version of Prayers of Love and Faith should not be contrary to or indicative of a departure from the doctrine of the Church of England”) added to that original motion by Synod.*
- 3. Look ahead at some of the challenges facing us as a church, particularly the bishops seeking to implement their response post-Synod.*

Looking back – The Bishops’ Response to LLF

Personally, one of the biggest disappointments I felt about the Bishops’ response to LLF was that it lacked a clearly articulated, substantial theological rationale for their proposals which drew on the work of LLF and sought to locate the bishops’ approach within the wider theological disagreements that LLF mapped out. As I have sought to understand the bishops’ proposals in relation to commending *Prayers of Love and Faith* and why so many bishops who hold to traditional teaching have, it seems, supported them, I have tried to construct a case for them that might be heard by those who feel compelled to resist their proposals. In so doing I have drawn on their original paper with its response to LLF and also later comments such as [the account given by the Bishop of London to General Synod](#) and especially the letter written by [the Bishop of Coventry](#) (who chaired the LLF process) to his diocese after the bishops’ response was published.

Ten years ago, I co-edited The Evangelical Alliance’s resource, *Biblical and pastoral responses to homosexuality*. In that we moved beyond the simple previous binary distinction which is often made in relation to sexuality, especially homosexuality, between orientation and practice and the judgment that while homosexual orientation should not be condemned, all homosexual practice was wrong. Drawing on the work of Mark Yarhouse we highlighted that “orientation” included attraction, orientation and identity and in relation to

practice we distinguished between relationships and practice. We summed up this new 5-fold category in these terms (p 28):

There are thus five distinct categories which need to be considered if we are to understand (homo)sexuality:

- Attraction – our sexual feelings and interests
- Orientation – a perceived settled pattern to our sexual attractions
- Identity – a label to identify ourselves in terms of our sexuality
- Behaviour – our sexual activity
- Relationship – a central, defining intimate relationship

In relation to this categorisation, it seems to me that the bishops, aided by the LLF resources, are being driven by two fundamental concerns with which it might be hoped (almost?) all would at least broadly have some sympathy.

Firstly, in relation to the first three categories that those who experience same-sex attraction or orientation and/or who identify as gay, lesbian or bi have been – and often continue to be – treated badly by the church. As a result, they feel rejected and often keep their distance from the church’s life even if they are followers of Jesus and have been committed in the past to sharing in the church’s life and mission. Faced with this reality, the church needs to repent, apologise, and change so as to be more clearly welcoming.

Secondly, in relation to the last of the five categories, that many of these people are in (or seek to be in) some form of “central, defining intimate relationship”. This is often now legally recognised as a civil partnership or civil marriage. Such relationships embody goods, involve embracing moral disciplines, and display a range of virtues which they require and whose nurture and cultivation they enable. The church has, however, failed to acknowledge this adequately, or even at all, in the past and thereby further alienated those in such relationships. This has also meant that those, both Christians and non-Christians, in such relationships and those among their family and friends who see the goods, moral disciplines, and virtues present in them cannot understand why the church apparently does not see them. They are often, as a result, confused and angered that the church appears, in Rowan Williams’ words, to hold that these relationships “have the nature of sin and nothing else”, a moral assessment which they, like him, can only view as “unreal and silly” or even, increasingly, as immoral (“[The Body’s Grace](#)”).

Alongside this, *thirdly*, the bishops are clear that all Christians are called to “walk together” as brothers and sisters united to one another in Christ by faith and baptism and to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). They have sought to agree proposals that might enable the highest degree of communion possible across [our deep differences](#) which are set out in both the LLF resources and the range of responses to them captured in [Listening with Love and Faith](#).

These three convictions have sadly often got lost in the focus on specifics but they are ones which all of us - particularly those of us who cannot accept the bishops’ proposals - need to engage with and they need to shape any alternative way forward.

One such alternative of course was the proposal the bishops brought after the Shared Conversations in [GS2055](#). Although it was lost (by 7 votes) in the House of Clergy and thus seen as a total failure, those proposals had an overall majority across Synod of 58 (60 if you correct for the one bishop who admitted he pressed the wrong button!), not much smaller than the 69 for the current proposal. GS2055 spoke of the need for “interpreting the existing law and guidance to permit maximum freedom within it, without changes to the law, or the doctrine of the Church” (para 22) and later commended “an unambiguous position on doctrine in this matter while enabling a generous freedom for pastoral practice that does not directly and publicly undermine it” (para 65). In many ways what is being proposed is in line with this stance but with a key shift which it appears is now thought legitimate when it was not before: GS2055 considered and rejected (paras 40-43) any new forms of service but we now have such services including of blessing as part of Prayers of Love and Faith (rather than, for example, as the [South African bishops](#) have, subsequently done, “accepted that we are not of one mind on this matter. The divisions within the Synod of Bishops reflect the divisions in the Church as a whole, and we are not at peace with one another on this issue” so what is needed is “guidelines on the form of prayers we are to use” in private contexts where there could be “prayers of affirmation and acknowledgement for all faithful Anglicans with which all of us can agree”).

For me, and the votes in Synod and wider reactions suggests for many others, there are at least two significant problems with the bishops’ proposals and these can be related to the last two of the 5 categories listed above. *Firstly*, they have as yet totally failed to address the crucial question of sexual behaviour and the Bible’s teaching and consequent church teaching about sexual immorality. *Secondly*, they have also failed to give a convincing account of how the relationship of marriage as the church has received it and they have reaffirmed it should be related to these other patterns of relationship with their particular goods, disciplines and virtues. Instead, they have simply asserted that there is a need “to uphold and celebrate the Christian vision and inherent goodness of faithful and permanent relationships in both marriage and other committed relationships between two people” (Bishop of London) or that they want to “joyfully affirm and...acknowledge in church, stable, committed relationships between two people – including same-sex relationships” (GS 2289, p. 1). Aware of this challenge, they have sought to distinguish “holy matrimony” from civil marriage as mutually exclusive concepts and institutions and seemed to suggest that as long as they are not claimed to be “holy matrimony” the church can celebrate, affirm, acknowledge and bless a variety of forms of such intimate relationships. As I set out in some detail [previously](#), the bishops’ new approach here is significantly at variance with past statements (and in apparent tension with the Bishop of London’s claim at General Synod that “There is no question of reneging on the validity” of the understanding that “opposite sex couples who have been civilly married are understood as being married in the sight of God and of the Church”) and creates major problems.

In terms of reception of the proposals, although there has been barely two months to consider them, a pattern is emerging from both the Synod debate and voting patterns and wider responses. Broadly speaking, there have been few who have welcomed the proposal as providing a coherent, convincing, or politically stable compromise to hold together people across the well-established polarised perspectives. Among those seeking change the proposals have been accepted as a step (for some small, for some more significant) in the

right direction but there is little sign of them being ready to lessen campaigns for further steps. Among those committed to current teaching and practice, the proposals have been seen by most as a step too far not only by those in the Church of England but across the global Anglican Communion as shown by responses from the [Global South Fellowship of Anglicans \(GSFA\)](#), [Evangelical Fellowship of the Anglican Communion \(EFAC\)](#) and the leadership of various provinces such as [Uganda](#), [Kenya](#), [Nigeria](#), [Tanzania](#), [Chile](#) and [South East Asia](#).

Looking back – Synod’s Response to the Bishops

The debate at General Synod and votes of 450 representatives across all 3 Houses are difficult to summarise and what follows highlights a number of features explored in more detail [here](#). There were 18 amendments voted on (13 moved by supporters of current teaching and 5 moved by those seeking change) covering a range of matters of substance and process. A brief summary of some of the key points evident from more detailed analysis would be that

- only one of the amendments (the Cornes amendment, discussed more below) was accepted, and this by only two votes in the House of Laity.
- all others were rejected by both the House of Bishops and the House of Clergy but 4 were passed by the House of Laity in addition to the one accepted by the other two Houses.
- in the final vote those who supported the Cornes amendment overwhelmingly voted against while those rejecting it voted overwhelmingly for the motion as amended.
- the votes of those Synod members who also voted on GS2055 signal that among clergy and laity most of those who rejected it now support these proposals but most of those who accepted it now reject these proposals.
- although the bishops were solidly against all the amendments proposed except the one they accepted, and only 4 voted against the final motion with 2 abstaining, they were far from voting *en bloc*. Only 2 other bishops followed the Archbishops in voting against every defeated amendment and for Cornes. In fact, 19 bishops voted for at least one of the conservative-sponsored amendments with 4 others abstaining on at least one. There were also 6 bishops who voted for at least one or more revisionist-sponsored amendments with 7 others abstaining on at least one and, significantly, 14 of them voted against and 4 abstained on the Cornes amendment that was passed.
- In relation to the Cornes amendment, looking at the votes in the houses of clergy and laity by diocese, in 8 dioceses both houses supported and in 5 dioceses both houses opposed with all others having one or both houses tied (17 dioceses) or one house supporting and one opposing (13 dioceses). In total there were 15 dioceses where the clergy opposed the Cornes amendment and 15 where the laity were opposed and 17 dioceses where clergy supported it and 20 where the laity supported it. Totalling across clergy and laity votes in each diocese, in 22 dioceses most members voted for (but in 9 only by a majority of 1), 2 were tied while 20 had majorities against (but in 8 only by a majority of 1).
- In relation to the final motion, both houses supported it in 11 dioceses and both rejected it in 5 dioceses, with 19 where one house was tied and 8 in which one house

supported and one house opposed. So, there were 10 dioceses where the clergy opposed the final motion and 16 where the laity were opposed compared to 23 dioceses where clergy supported it and 18 where the laity supported it. If we look at the total votes across both houses in each diocese, in 23 dioceses most members voted for (but in 7 only by a majority of 1), 4 were tied while 16 had majorities against (but in 6 only by a majority of 1).

It seems clear, in summary, that although the amended motion was passed in all 3 houses and overall by a majority of 58% for to 42% against, there are a significant proportion of Synod members (likely well over 1/3 and outside of the episcopacy perhaps 40%-45%) who are resolutely opposed to the proposals. In contrast there is another significant proportion who, though supportive, are unhappy about maintaining the doctrine of marriage and that doctrine constraining the proposals. This level of disagreement or more is found in almost all diocesan groupings with only just over a quarter of dioceses having both clergy and lay representatives supportive of the final motion and just over half the dioceses where the elected representatives were supportive and nearly 40% where they were opposed to the final motion.

In considering how to develop their proposals, the bishops need to consider this rather precarious political situation. They also have to consider the implications of their commitment, now supported by Synod, to continue to uphold the doctrine of marriage. The Cornes amendment emphasises that the bishops have to convincingly show – legally and theologically – that in their proposals, once finalised, they have successfully accomplished “their intention that the final version of Prayers of Love and Faith should not be contrary to or indicative of a departure from the doctrine of the Church of England”. Presumably this applies also to their new pastoral guidance. This, given their commitment not to change the doctrine of marriage, raises a number of significant issues which are explored in the [next article](#).

LLF: Recent Past, Present & Future – Part Two

Looking at the issues: No change to the doctrine of marriage

The bishops in their response to LLF stated “we have agreed at this time to maintain the doctrine of Holy Matrimony which the Church has received, and which is set out in its Canons and authorised liturgies” (p7) and they continued “namely that Holy Matrimony is between one man and one woman for life”. That final phrase is, however, only aspect of the doctrine of marriage as both Canon B30, and the Book of Common Prayer it summarises, say much more than this. In particular, as the Bishop of London said in [an answer to a question](#) raised in November last year (q38) as to whether Canon B30 “represents the doctrine of the Church” and so “any sexual relations outside of this definition of marriage is a sin”:

Canon B 30 does indeed continue to articulate the doctrine of the Church, including asserting that holy matrimony is the proper context for sexual intimacy.

This view was also clearly stated in the [Pastoral Statement of December 2019](#) (para 9), quoting the last teaching document on Marriage from the House of Bishops. It is referred to in the LLF book (p. 33) and it has in the past been regularly stated by Archbishop Justin as his own understanding. However, the response to LLF simply claims (p. 8) that “while not explicitly stated in the Church’s Canons, for many years the church has taught that the only rightful place for sexual activity is marriage”. At Synod, the Bishop of London seemed (while repeating e.g. in answer to questions 146 & 147 and 150 the current teaching in this area) studiously to avoid referring to the Church’s *doctrine* in this area. She and others, including the Archbishop of York, have made statements that suggest *either* that this is no longer the Church’s doctrine *or* that the bishops are still to decide whether it remains the Church’s doctrine and will do so in their pastoral guidance.

There would, in the light of this, appear to be 3 options open to the bishops:

1. In line with past statements and their commitment to maintain the doctrine of marriage to reaffirm this teaching concerning sexual behaviour as part of that doctrine and be faithful to it in the final version of the prayers and their pastoral guidance.
2. To seek to revise this teaching concerning sexual behaviour and so renege on their commitment to maintain existing doctrine and either claim they as bishops have the authority to alter the doctrine unilaterally and perhaps by a simple majority or to propose such a change to see if can gain the support of 2/3 of each House of Synod.
3. To revise this teaching concerning sexual behaviour and to claim that all previous statements have been in error in stating that it is the doctrine of the Church and defend this rapid reinterpretation and overturning of the supposedly unchanged doctrine.

This is the first of five issues that are important in relation to what the bishops, now supported by Synod, say is the case in relation to their response to LLF, namely that it is and should be

Neither contrary to nor indicative of a departure from the doctrine of the Church of England

There are also a number of challenges facing the claim that the proposed prayers are not even “indicative of a departure” from the doctrine of the Church of England. Four, in particular, stand out.

Looking at the Issues: Marriage and Sex

Assuming it remains the case that the doctrine of marriage includes “asserting that holy matrimony is the proper context for sexual intimacy” (Bishop of London, November 2022) then, as supported by legal advice in 2016 (in appendix to [GS 2055](#), especially para 9) and 2018 there would be major difficulties in using the prayers for any relationship (whatever its goods, disciplines or virtues) that was a sexual relationship but not holy matrimony. While ways around this may be found, they are likely to result in prayers being pastorally unusable on the part of most clergy, couples, and congregations who would wish to use them as those using them generally do not support that doctrine.

The alternatives as noted above are to change the doctrine or to claim it was mis-stated previously. These, however, involving altering the historic and publicly stated moral teaching of the church concerning sexual immorality. We then need to ask, drawing on the work of the Faith and Order Commission in *Communion and Disagreement* and summarised in the [LLF book \(230-4\)](#), about the seriousness of this change: what level of disagreement do our differences over this matter represent? It would be difficult, given the biblical witness and its consistent warnings concerning sexual immorality, to see this as a relatively unimportant matter or *adiaphora*.

Looking at the Issues: Same-sex civil marriage and the doctrine of marriage

As I set out in [an earlier article](#), ever since the introduction of same-sex marriage the bishops, and the Church of England in a legal case, have argued that to enter a same-sex civil marriage is to depart from the church’s teaching whether one is ordained or not (e.g. [2014 statement](#), paras 21, 26 and 27). In the case of a clergyperson doing so “he or she is fashioning his life in a way that is inconsistent with the doctrine of Christ as expounded by Canon B 30” according to the 2016 legal advice (para 12). It would therefore appear that the proposal that prayers of celebration and blessing may be said to mark a civil marriage between people of the same-sex is also “inconsistent with the doctrine of Christ as expounded by Canon B 30”. That legal advice set out (para 13) the view that this could only change by amending Canon B 30 or issuing a teaching document explaining “that a person who enters into such a civil marriage should not, merely by doing so, be considered as acting in a way contrary to the doctrine set out in Canon B 30”. The attempt by the bishops and their legal advisors to offer an explanation for this shift not only falls well short of either of these routes, a central element of its logic – the separation of civil marriages from holy matrimony, despite the [vows at a civil ceremony](#) possibly including ‘I do solemnly declare, that I know not of any lawful impediment why I (your name) may not be joined in matrimony to (your partner’s full name)’ - has, it seems, convinced nobody. The presumption must, therefore, be that the prayers if used in relation to a couple in a civil same-sex marriage (and perhaps even a civil partnership given that legally this is seen as

equivalent to a same-sex marriage) are, as proposed, in fact “indicative of a departure from the doctrine of the Church of England” until some better legal advice and teaching from the bishops persuasively argues otherwise.

Looking at the Issues: Prayers distinct from marriage prayers

In her [presentation to General Synod](#), the Bishop of London, stated that the Prayers of Love and Faith enable “welcoming and celebrating the Christian virtues of faithfulness, mutual love and lifelong commitment of so many same-sex couples in our churches and in wider society” and they do so “without changing the Church’s doctrine of holy matrimony” because “they do not use any of the liturgical material of the Church of England’s authorised services of marriage”. Here we have a clear statement as to one of the conditions that the bishops recognise need to be met if the prayers are not to be indicative of a departure from the doctrine of the Church of England. Yet the Synod had [already been given](#) details “of the original liturgical sources from which the prayers, acclamations and promises in ‘Prayers of Love and Faith’ are drawn” by the Bishop of Lichfield in answer to a question (Q 176) from Andrew Atherstone. These reveal that 15 of the 31 draft prayers are lifted or adapted from the marriage liturgy in *Common Worship: Pastoral Services*. Putting together this fact from the Vice-Chair of the Liturgical Commission with the criterion presented by the Chair of the Next Steps Group shows that considerably more work needs to be done.

Looking at the Issues: What does it mean to bless?

There also needs to be greater clarity about the nature of blessing - biblically, theologically, liturgically, and pastorally – and what is being proposed. This is key to the bishops’ response but a matter which was unaddressed in the LLF materials and so is a novelty needing careful scrutiny. There have been a number of claims made and at least five important outstanding issues:

First, the Archbishop of Canterbury, at [the press conference](#), stressed that “this seeks to bless people and that’s really important”. There can be no objection to praying for God to bless a person – we are commanded even to bless those who persecute us (Romans 12:14) but the prayers very clearly are for the people as a couple and for their relationship. The legal advice acknowledges this even as it seeks to make another distinction by stating “any blessing is of the couple and the good in their relationship, not of the civil status they may have acquired” (para 4). Andrew Davison, author of a book-length study of blessing, wrote an article for the *Church Times* entitled, “[We will bless couples, not just people](#)” in which he was clear:

There have been suggestions that we are blessing people, not relationships. That is not a good distinction to make. Anthropologically, it is not tenable to talk about people or couples in abstraction from their relationships, commitments, or households.

Second, whether it is simply on people or on the relationship is important in relation to the prayers’ compatibility with doctrine because [Isabelle Hamley’s paper on blessing](#) which resourced the bishops states that “A prayer of blessing specifically over the relationship would *imply a judgement that this relationship is in keeping with what we understand of*

God's divine purposes (p. 7, italics added)". This is at best in tension and perhaps total contradiction to another claim that has been made to defend blessing as not indicative of a departure from doctrine: "God's blessing...is not a statement of approval" (Bishop of London to General Synod).

This highlights a serious challenge to the approach taken by the bishops of offering prayers with no clear commitments being made by those prayed for (unlike the service of prayer and dedication after a civil marriage). *Either* it is to be held that praying for people in a particular relationship "is not a statement of approval" in which case it would appear that the prayers could, perhaps should, be offered to everyone with no concern as to the pattern of relationship just as we bless those who persecute us. *Or* there needs to be some discernment and, in the proper sense, discrimination shown (as, for example, in relation to remarriage in church after divorce). It would appear that – despite the comments above disconnecting blessing from approval and stressing its universality – the bishops are inclined to follow the second path given the Bishop of London responded to [Q163 at the February Synod](#) by saying that the Pastoral Guidance "will include setting out unequivocally the necessary qualities for a relationship to be considered chaste, faithful and holy. This will necessarily include ensuring that the relationship does not transgress existing legal relationships, such as a marriage or civil partnership". The key issue here is captured again by Andrew Davison, a supporter of the proposed way forward:

Nor, ethically, can we relinquish the need to be discerning over what we bless, and what we do not. It won't work to evade that by shifting from the relationship to the people. I would not bless arms-trading. By no means, then, could I go to an arms fair, and bless it anyway, saying that I'm only blessing the arms-dealer, and not his work or way of life. Blessing requires discernment. I look forward immensely to blessing same-sex couples, but that has to mean that I would not bless a relationship that is clearly abusive, for instance, or openly promiscuous.

If this path of discernment is the one the bishops take then, for the prayers to conform to the amendment, judgments concerning which relationships can be prayed for will need clearly to be consistent with the church's doctrine of marriage.

Third, those who carefully read the bishops' response noted that the prayers included prayers *of* dedication and thanksgiving but prayers *for* God's blessing. Some who clearly uphold the doctrine of marriage have highlighted this distinction between prayers *of* and *for* blessing in justifying their support for the proposals. Whatever the validity of such a nuanced distinction in principle (itself a matter on which there are major disagreements) or its importance in enabling some bishops to support the proposals, it soon became clear that the Archbishop of York and other bishops were not committed to carefully upholding it and were happy to talk of same-sex couples now being able to receive a blessing or God's blessing.

Fourth, these developments need to be set within the wider Anglican Communion where [the 1998 Lambeth resolution I.10](#) made clear that the bishops of the Communion "cannot advise the legitimising or blessing of same sex unions". As recently as their [December 2019 statement](#) on Civil Partnerships the bishops (para 18) quoted the previous Archbishop's

statement that “it is through liturgy that we express what we believe, and that there is no theological consensus about same sex unions” and the Primates conclusion that “therefore, we as a body cannot support the authorisation of such rites”. At the Press Conference the current Archbishop claimed the prayers “fall very clearly within” Lambeth I.10 but the reality seems to be quite the opposite and the Archbishop of York, other bishops, and the CofE comms department have described the proposed changes in a way that fall very clearly outside Lambeth 1.10. The logic of the House now appears to amount to, “there is no theological consensus about same sex unions. Therefore, we as a body support commending prayers and forms of service for the blessing of same-sex unions including same-sex marriages”.

Fifth, in determining whether or not, in the light of the above, the prayers are indicative of a departure from the doctrine of the Church of England it is important that attention is not paid solely to the words on the page. The current draft wording, by not referring to the couples as married and not speaking of sexual intimacy, could perhaps be argued to be in conformity with the doctrine of marriage. I suspect I could pray many, perhaps most, of the prayers for an unmarried cohabiting couple or a couple in a same-sex civil marriage, if I were doing so privately and in the context of pastoral care and discipleship where I am explaining and commending to them the church’s doctrine of marriage and encouraging them to order their life together in greater conformity to it. But the test of whether a departure from doctrine is being indicated depends on the prayers as acts of the worshipping church and so the context in which, and the people and relationships for which, they are prayed are crucial. The same prayers said in a public service which makes no reference to the doctrine of marriage or teaching about chastity and instead simply celebrates whatever non-marital commitment two people have made to each other, probably in the context of a sexual relationship, are very different. This is particularly the case given the likelihood of the service, perhaps following soon after a civil ceremony of marriage, and involving much of the ceremonial and choreography associated with a wedding (the prayers themselves refer to rings) as is, it seems, the case with such services when they occur unofficially at present as explained in a recent study:

All four priests indicated that all services of blessing they attended or officiated at were seen and discussed as marriages by the clergy involved, the couple themselves and their guests. Typically, Father Peter answered my question about the vocabulary that was used with and around the same-sex couples whose union he celebrated by saying that whereas “publicly it was a service of prayer and thanksgiving, privately we talked about marriage and wedding. The guests talked about ‘the wedding.’ In the reception hall, the decoration, everything was about a wedding” (“Blessing Same-Sex Unions in the Church of England, *Journal of Anglican Studies* (2019), 17, p. 156).

In summary, if the bishops are to take seriously their own commitment to continue to uphold the doctrine of marriage and not to act in ways indicative of a departure from it then ([as Christopher Cocksworth has set out](#)) there are several major theological, liturgical, and legal questions they need to answer. This is particularly so given they are now arguing for developments which they rejected when they sought in GS2055 to uphold the doctrine and to enable “maximum freedom within it”.

LLF: Recent Past, Present & Future – Part Three

Looking ahead – where do we go from here?

What the bishops have offered in their response and what the Synod has (with the significant Cornes amendment) supported was described as indicating the direction of travel. In much of the CofE comms, print and social media reporting, and in a video produced and shown to Synod and [now posted online](#), the impression given is of full-steam ahead. This portrays there now being an irreversible move to accept blessing non-marital unions, including same-sex marriages, and perhaps changes to the patterns of life permitted to those in ordained ministry.

If, however, the bishops' own commitment to uphold the current doctrine of marriage, now supported by Synod, is taken seriously then this creates major challenges to this narrative. It would appear that the bishops face four broad options:

to admit their current proposals fail to meet these conditions and so, if they are to be implemented, there needs to be a change of some form to the doctrine of marriage, *or* to clarify and revise the proposals in such a way that what they permit clearly does not indicate a departure from the doctrine. The difficulty here is that this is likely to lead to proposed changes that (as in GS 2055) are so limited that what is offered is something which few (if any) are seeking and is likely, to use words found in past legal advice, to “be considered pastorally unusable in respect of the occasion for which it was intended” *or*

to recognise that there are deep disagreements within the church, and perhaps among the bishops themselves, as to whether or not what is being proposed passes the doctrinal test and take time to address this further. This would be in the hope that greater clarity and consensus and/or some settlement as to how we live best together across our differences will emerge in a process of reception

to exert episcopal and archepiscopal power in order to drive forward what they have now been understood to promise, while still insisting they have kept to the constraints set down in the amendment even through effectively this means overturning or disregarding past legal advice and clear episcopal teaching as to the doctrine of marriage.

The worrying signs so far are that this fourth option is the one being pursued. Leadership does not here involve listening and responding to the significant and substantive concerns being raised in relation to these proposals and taking seriously the need for a process of reception. Leadership, in this perspective, involves viewing the concerns as the storm caused by people who are upset, a storm that was predicted and needs to be ignored in order to reach the intended destination as quickly as possible. Among the many negative effects if this is what happens is its effect on the respect and trust in the LLF process and, even more seriously, the episcopate of the Church of England. There is strong anecdotal evidence that respect and trust has already been significantly eroded. One bishop [reported](#) on their group at General Synod which met before the debate and vote:

In my group, all expressed their fear and confusion about the LLF process; why Synod hadn't been given more agency in the LLF process and there was a sense of their being silenced and of betrayal by the Bishops, which was reinforced by the Bishops' 'leak'.

If, instead of addressing this, the bishops yield to the temptation to plough on with their plans and keep to the tight timetable of completing the process by July, they will not only have appeared to sit loose to their commitment to conform their actions to the church's doctrine and to pay attention to power. They will have increased the levels of fear and confusion and deepened the experience of being silenced, disregarded, and betrayed already identified.

All this will, inevitably, make it much more difficult to accomplish their goal of us walking together as far as possible and as closely as possible. To achieve this goal will require, instead, facing up to what [for me](#) and others was one of the significant fruits of the LLF process but one which the bishops' response simply sidesteps or turns a blind eye to: our disagreements arise because of the deeply and sincerely held, divergent and often incompatible, theological convictions within the church on these matters.

In the [recent words](#) of the Bishop of Rochester to his Diocesan Synod:

My profoundest instinct as a pastor is to seek for a way forward that could be embraced by all. However, the divided nature of the votes at General Synod, together with the reactions of people with very diverse convictions about these issues, have led me to believe that this is simply not possible. There are fundamentally different conceptions amongst us of what God requires of his people in terms of how we live out our relationships and our sexuality. In the end, each of us has to make a choice about our own understanding of these hugely important and deeply personal issues. As Bishop of the Diocese of Rochester, I am having to make a choice on where I stand, painful though that is. My fellow bishops up and down the country will each make their choices – and one thing is certain: that we will not all agree. And then we as God's people will have to work out how we will relate to one another, care for one another and love each other as followers of Jesus Christ and children of our heavenly Father.

Whatever path we eventually take, consideration is going to have to be made as to what taking it means for the very significant minority who fundamentally disagree with it and want to take a different path. Few of them are likely to wish simply to "walk apart" but they cannot, in good conscience, simply "walk together" down the chosen path. It may even be the case that, even if not in relation to the prayers, then in relation to the pastoral guidance which more directly addresses the exercise of episcopal ministry, this dilemma of conscientiously following different paths will soon have to be faced among the bishops themselves.

Appeals to unity are right and proper but we cannot ignore the other marks of the church and the sad reality that in every other Christian denomination, (as the CEEC pointed out in their important [Gospel, Church and Marriage: Preserving Apostolic Faith and Life](#)), when a church is perceived by a significant minority to be moving away from 'apostolic' and

‘catholic’ teaching concerning what it means to be ‘holy’ this will tragically mean it becoming less visibly ‘one’.

If the bishops are serious about being a focus of unity both within their dioceses (most of which as we have seen appear significantly divided) and the Church of England, then they cannot simply carry on “full steam ahead” given the many questions that remain unanswered about why they have chosen this path. Nor is it helpful to suggest there is ultimately a binary choice between *either* accepting the proposals, however reluctantly, which have the support of a majority, for the sake of unity *or* being guilty, by resisting them, of causing division and schism. Such an insistence on “unity” framed in these terms will, paradoxically, probably make it more difficult to achieve the highest degree of communion possible and even risks not just the falling apart of not just the Church of England but the total collapse of the Anglican Communion.

Rather, we each need to recognise the sad reality of which the Archbishop of York spoke in his Synod speech – “I am already living, as all of us are, with impaired Eucharistic communion within our church”. And that means, [as he would subsequently write](#), we need, based on recognition of our baptismal communion with one another (and with those who are not Anglicans and in quite separate ecclesial structures of jurisdiction) that has helped ecumenical relations, “to apply the same ecumenical theology to some of our own internal disagreements as members of the Church of England and the worldwide Anglican Communion”.

This is the best, perhaps only, way to avoid repeating the sad history “where disagreement usually leads to division, division to conflict, and conflict to schism”. But if we are to do this then we need what in Synod he called “discussions about some kind of settlement”, discussions that can only benefit from being set in the wider Communion context of reflection on what the ACC agreed ([Resolution 3\(a\)](#)) shortly after General Synod met: how we might secure some form of “[good differentiation](#)” through exploring “theological questions regarding structure and decision-making to help address our differences” and “learning from our ecumenical conversations how to accommodate differentiation patiently and respectfully”. As those words from the Communion context signal, this challenging process cannot be limited simply to giving pastoral reassurances or a focus on individual consciences without reference to structures and decision-making.

These discussions cannot be expected – even within the Church of England - to reach an agreed solution by this summer. That, in turn, means that - assuming most bishops agree with the Archbishop of York that “I won't be able to support commending these prayers until we have the pastoral guidance *and pastoral provision*” (italics added) - there is no point in driving forward the current proposals as they stand. Much better to take the third option suggested above: continue a process of reception in which the prayers and new pastoral guidance can be developed with serious theological consideration as to whether this is possible within the limits set by the church's doctrine while also engaging in exploration of our own “settlement” in order to secure sufficient “pastoral reassurance” and “provision” and, where necessary, “good differentiation” in some structural form, consistent with that being discerned in and for the wider Communion.