

Reflections on a public letter from Inclusive Organisations on the LLF process, Andrew Goddard, July 2023.

There has recently been a flurry of correspondence, public or leaked, concerning the progress of Prayers of Love and Faith (PLF) and the wider Living in Love and Faith (LLF) discernment process. First there was [a letter](#) from leaders of a range of networks (including some previously publicly silent on these matters) raising serious questions about procedure and “paying attention to power” and urging detailed synodical scrutiny to seek authorisation under canon B2. This was then [reportedly](#) followed by support for it from 22 bishops writing to fellow bishops and other leaders. It was also reported that a larger group of bishops had written against that proposal but with few details as to content or signatories. Those bishops have now been joined by [leaders of various inclusive networks](#) objecting to the B2 proposal and urging the bishops to press on and introduce the prayers and issue “more realistic and humane pastoral guidance” on their own authority as bishops.

While there are challenges in pursuing conversation and debate by letters with multiple signatories, the correspondence has the advantage of allowing clear articulation of the perspective and concerns of those signing. As [someone supportive of the first letter](#) it has been particularly helpful to understand more the concerns of those pressing for change and their reactions to that letter.

The original letter is presented as simply a “growing campaign...to delay and obstruct the progress of the Living in Love and Faith journey”. While that is, sadly, unsurprising – and may be applicable to some who are seen as part of that campaign – it is also rather reductionist. This is because it fails to recognise a number of elements:

- we are still in a process of discernment about the direction of the LLF journey (including details relating to PLF) which is not fixed and it is therefore hard to speak of what equals “progress” with great clarity or certainty
- although the majority mind of Synod was expressed in February there are real and unresolved disagreements about the implications of the motion’s final wording
- the vote was won in all 3 houses but with a tight Brexit-like 52:48 among the laity and the overwhelming majority among the bishops is clearly no longer as strong as it was. Seeking stronger and clearer consensus is therefore not unreasonable
- there are genuine questions about due process and unprecedented paths of liturgical approval going forward and these cannot be ignored or dismissed as simply delaying and obstruction tactics.

In what follows I offer some reflections on each of the four areas addressed in the letter which are in places critical but I hope also constructive and fair.

Resistance to LLF

The signatories see what they are opposing as indicating “above all, the failure of many in the Church to engage fully in the LLF journey in which we have participated together for the last six years”. As someone very much involved in that journey as a member of the Co-Ordinating Group I share that sadness. I am encouraged that the signatories – not all of whom have been so positive about LLF during those six years– recognise its “valuable theological and pastoral reflection” and I agree “that the conservative view of marriage and sex was very fully represented throughout the LLF process”.

The picture of that failure of engagement is, however, far from painting a full or fair picture. The claim that “groups like the Church of England Evangelical Council have actively discouraged churches from making use of the LLF resources” is demonstrably false. It cannot be denied that many evangelicals regrettably did not engage with LLF or they used its materials selectively and not always in ways that I believe can be said to have honoured its purpose of enabling various views to be represented as fully and fairly as possible. However, as someone who serves on CEEC, I could not

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have done so given my commitment to LLF if they “actively discouraged churches from making use of the LLF resources”. A simple scrutiny of their website shows that the reality is the total opposite. Under their resources they still have [an LLF page](#). It begins by expressing gratitude “to those who have participated in the LLF process” and says it has kept the resources online “to support those still participating”. The resources comprise guides for [leaders](#) and [participants](#) and reflections from four of us ([Elaine Storkey](#), [Jason Roach](#), [Ed Shaw](#), and [me](#)) who were involved in producing the LLF resources. We explain who we are and our role in LLF, what we learned from involvement, what challenged us and how we challenged others, and what our top tip would be for those getting involved in LLF. I don’t expect the letter’s signatories to agree with all that is on that page but I am intrigued as to how they can represent this as “active discouragement” and wonder if any attempt was seriously made to review CEEC’s responses to LLF before writing as they do. Although they could not be expected to know this, I also ran two LLF groups very early in the process which drew a significant number of members of the Council to engage with the course with no modifications.

The letter also fails to be honest about the very mixed response to LLF engagement among their own networks (just as there was among evangelicals). Some clearly committed inclusive churches did engage with the materials and some even invited in outside conservative voices to learn from them. Georgina Elsey, curate at St John’s, Hyde Park, invited me to preach before they ran the course and then [interviewed me](#) about my views to share with those doing the course (with [me then interviewing her](#) more recently). I know, however, that two of the largest and most prominent inclusive churches in London diocese – St Martin-in-the-Fields and St James, Piccadilly – did not run the course. It would be interesting to know in what ways each of the signatories and the churches and networks they represent have engaged fully in the LLF journey and what was learned through it.

I strongly agree with the letter when it later notes that part of LLF is about being “a more honest Church”. In writing as they do about “resistance to LLF” I fear that there is not such honesty and in relation to CEEC it feels like – to use their next heading – they are guilty of a “misrepresentation of history”.

There needs to be a similar honesty when it comes to what LLF did and did not seek to do, what remained to be done after it produced the resources and after they were used in the wider church, and whether it is really therefore inexplicable to present “the proposals offered by the House of Bishops to February Synod as in some way sudden or rushed”. Obviously, it is right to say that those proposals are in one sense “the fruit of decades of debate and six years of intense work, in which all bishops committed to engage”. However, that would be true of any outcome of any discernment process. It could have been said if, after one meeting, the bishops simply issued a statement declaring their mind. It fails to acknowledge a number of other key aspects of the LLF process.

- LLF was a suite of educational resources which was descriptive of different views and debates. It distinguished between current church teaching and emerging alternative views but it did not adjudicate between them or offer alternative pathways forward.
- In fact, it consciously decided not to articulate a range of internally coherent but distinct perspectives. Instead, it chose to close with a section of people in conversation rather than presenting alternative reasoned cases for different answers to key questions.
- The discernment process was indisputably “rushed” in the sense that the initial meeting to begin it over several days was cancelled due to the Queen’s death. There was therefore less time, in what many considered already a tight schedule, to discern and process together.

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- The bishops failed to address crucial questions concerning same-sex marriage and sex outside holy matrimony before offering the prayers and have continued to fail to reach a decision on them between February and July. As Charlie Bell recently [tweeted](#), “the lack of an answer to this specific question is why there is no Pastoral Guidance”
- Most of the key moves made by the bishops to reach their conclusion (e.g. on the distinction between civil marriage and holy matrimony or on the nature of blessing/prayers for blessing) are quite novel and were not covered within the LLF resources
- Key questions which are covered in the LLF resources (such as the significance of our disagreements, how we understand sexuality in relation to creation and the Fall, the legitimate range of views concerning Scripture and its authority) were not explored or explained by the bishops
- The bishops were only able to offer very limited explanations and justifications of their proposals and did not seek to show their workings based on the LLF materials.

The letter rightly reminds those of us who hold different views that the proposals have required “pain and sacrifice of faithful same-sex couples in the Church of England”. It is also honest that acceptance of the current proposals is not a settlement but only “a practical step to a better welcome of LGBTQIA people”. It needs to be acknowledged, however, that some (perhaps even many) conservatives are open to finding ways in which they are not forced to accept this pain and sacrifice and our different understandings of what is meant by “a better welcome” can be recognised. However, this process cannot ignore the concerns of those who continue to believe what the church teaches. It requires honesty in relation to the church’s doctrine and consequently creativity in relation to the church’s ordering if we are in any sense to make space somehow for the embodiment of “differing views on the interpretation of Scripture in matters of marriage and sexuality in full integrity”.

Misrepresentation of history

This second section helpfully reminds us that part of our problem is that we each tell such different stories of where we have been and how we have got to where we are. We are, I am sure, all guilty of “selective reading” when it comes to history including “the recent history of decision-making in the Church on this matter”. That is why we need to listen to our different histories and correct each other and learn from each other. I have a number of differences with the account offered here.

In one sense it can be said, as the letter writers do, that “the Canons and the marriage liturgies....are entirely silent on same-sex relationships” but once again this seems to me to be at best a partial truth on at least three important grounds. First, these need to be understood in the light of Scripture and the wider tradition and in their original context before determining what conclusions can legitimately be drawn from the silence. As with the argument from the silence of the gospels, once we put them in their historical context, we see that, secondly, given the overwhelming social and ecclesial consensus at the time it is inconceivable that the silence can legitimately be understood as providing grounds for supporting same-sex marriage or sexual unions. Thirdly, especially in that context, the texts are (like Jesus in the gospels) not quite as “entirely silent” as might appear on the surface. When the BCP says 'For be ye well assured, that so many as are coupled together otherwise than God's Word doth allow are not joined together by God; neither is their Matrimony lawful.' (BCP) it would unquestionably have included same-sex sexual unions in that category. When we are told in the BCP that marriage “was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of

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Christ's body" (which Canon B30 summarises as "for the hallowing and right direction of the natural instincts and affections") it is hard to deny that this has been universally understood until very recently as implicitly prohibiting same-sex sexual relationships.

Is it not better to say that we are now facing a social situation which, in some key respects, is novel concerning the pattern, interpretation, and evaluation of same-sex relationships but that the historic teaching and practice of the church clearly took a negative stance, on biblical and theological principle, to all earlier patterns of same-sex relationship. The questions we therefore face are more along the lines of

- is that previous consensus still sufficiently strong at present?,
- what weight should it be given in our current evaluations?,
- have we a clear new consensus for changing our practice and developing our doctrine?
- what do we do when the old consensus is in decline but there is not as yet a clear new consensus established?

I think we are more likely to find a way forward by wrestling with our different approaches to these questions, rather than by asserting (which I have to confess I fail to understand) that "we cannot follow the logic that silence means prohibition, especially when the Church of England is governed by the law of England where whatever is not forbidden is allowed".

Having sought to weaken the basis for the current teaching in the canons and liturgies, it is claimed that all we have currently is "an unsteady edifice of decisions" based on "a particular reading of Scripture...and a single Synod vote". Once again I find myself responding, "mmm...sort of, but not really". The "particular reading of Scripture" is pretty much the church's universal consensus until the last few decades (not something that can be said of every part of Anglican doctrine) and still the reading of the overwhelming majority of Anglicans and other Christians today. In relation to the 1987 Synod vote referred to, while "many of those present" may now regret it, the vote was overwhelming (403-8) and claimed simply to sum up "biblical and traditional teaching". That combination of Scripture, tradition and synodical approval is why it is not the whole truth to say of later responses to changing legal and social norms that they were made "by the House of Bishops alone". They were in the sense that nobody else signed off on them but the bishops were simply applying the mind of Synod concerning biblical and traditional teaching to new situations as they arose.

It is also not accurate to refer to "a single Synod vote of 1987". In 1997 Synod commended *Issues* (from 1991) for discussion while acknowledging it "was not the last word on the subject". More significantly, in February 2007, General Synod committed the Church of England not to do "anything that could be perceived as the Church of England qualifying its commitment to the entirety of the relevant Lambeth Conference Resolutions (1978: 10; 1988: 64; 1998: 1.10)". This in effect reaffirmed the heart of the 1987 vote given its teaching on marriage and sexual behaviour and that of the Conference Resolutions was the same.

What is not totally clear is what the mind of the current Synod would be other than being quite seriously divided. It may, therefore, be that the best way forward now is to find ways of testing the mind of the Synod on the key contentious issues before reaching any decisions as it appears has been the process recently within the House and College of Bishops. Using canon B2 for PLF would be one way, but not the only or necessarily the best way, of attempting this.

The letter's signatories, however, appear unconcerned about involving Synod, arguing that on key matters such as liturgies of blessing, the pattern of life expected of ordinands and clergy, whether

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those in same-sex marriages can be ordained or licensed, “it is quite legitimate for the House to revisit them according to its own processes”. There is no recognition here that the bishops have in the past

- worked with the grain of the demonstrable synodical consensus within the wider consensus of both the Anglican Communion and church catholic,
- understood themselves to be fulfilling their vows to uphold doctrine, and
- explained they are following such logic as the need for clergy to order their lives in conformity with church teaching.

There appears in the letter to be an alarming willingness to allow, even encourage, the bishops simply to decree unilaterally what should now be done – as long, one suspects, as they give the desired answers – without any of these checks and balances as safeguards or mechanisms to enable accountability and nurture the highest degree of communion possible.

The journey to the Prayers of Love and Faith

The opening sentence of this section is one of the very few statements that can be made at present where there is perhaps wide agreement:

this painful and contested situation cannot continue, for the sake of the proclamation of the Gospel in England and our own integrity and peace as a Church.

There is, however, no clear and significant consensus as to what follows from this, what the alternative is that we should embrace. We are well and truly stuck, unable to agree what to do, where to go, next. The songwriter Paul Simon recently described finding himself when writing a song in a situation where “everywhere I went led me where I didn’t want to be so I was stuck”. The problem we face is that it seems that everywhere we might go as a church leads us to somewhere where a very significant number within the church do not want to be.

The letter’s authors complain that the church is facing “a political manoeuvre” to create a “sad and discreditable deadlock in Synod”. But maybe that is not being engineered. Maybe deadlock is the sad reality of where we are as a church. On some of the key doctrinal and ethical questions that divide us – notably those relating to sex outside marriage, including in committed same-sex relationships, and how we should view and respond to civil same-sex marriage – it looks like there may perhaps be over 50% in each House of Synod desiring some change. However, it also seems clear that those wishing such change are less than two-thirds in at least one, perhaps two or even all three, Houses. Is there not at least a case to be answered (rather than as here summarily dismissed) that seeking “a process requiring two-third majorities” is the historic, proper, due process rather than an attempt at obstruction? Especially given the authors subsequently admit (in their final “The future before us” section) that what is being sought represents “a new phase of reception”, “a crux”, and “a significant moment which will make some question their place in the Church”. When the issue in dispute is not *whether* we might develop “a set of prayers for same-sex couples *which do not directly impact the doctrine of marriage*” (italics added) but precisely *what the proper boundaries would be* for this “creative and helpful response”, the law is clear that it is two-thirds majority in each House which determines the answer of General Synod and hence the Church of England.

A further reason why so many committed to current teaching and practice are so concerned is captured in the picture painted in the letter of the expectations their churches often have for those in lay leadership (and formation in faithful discipleship more widely). As long as what the letter describes is not limited to same-sex couples but applied consistently and with pastoral sensitivity to

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all in sexual relationships other than marriage, this is simply one legitimate pattern of applying church teaching. The authors articulate how difficult this can be for all such couples (which needs to be heard and, in my experience, most conservative church leaders recognise) but they do so in such a way that implies that this should in future not be permitted within Church of England congregations. Here we see some of the real challenges so often lost in talking about “walking together” despite our differences. Are the signatories willing to tolerate such, to them ([as Mike Higton has argued](#)), ongoing injustices and even harm? What sense does it make to say that a Church of England congregation might legitimately prevent someone exercising a lay ministry because of their sexual relationship when the next-door clergyperson or even the bishop is living in that pattern of relationship? If we are formally to allow mutually contradictory ethics and the consequent different expectations for Christians, especially leaders, how will people know where they stand and can a house so divided against itself stand?

The authors interestingly note one of the main reasons we have got into this deadlock when they write of “a state of dishonesty and hypocrisy in which bishops as well as candidates and those who administer the process are jointly complicit”. They put the blame for this on “the continuing use of *Issues* in the discernment process” but it is important to recognise the claim being made here. Is not the logic of this that the fact that people have been bending and breaking the church’s stated policies (and so acting dishonestly and hypocritically because they disagreed with them but were unable to change them by due process) is really the fault of those who believed in those policies and expected the church, having agreed to them, to adhere to them? The assumption appears to be being made that the policies are now going to be abandoned and replaced by “a fresh set of more realistic and humane pastoral guidance, especially for clergy”. However, nothing in the Synod motion signalled or required that, it appears the bishops had not even discussed such matters relating to the guidance before February, and the update to the July Synod makes clear that still nothing has been agreed and there are no decisions by the bishops.

This section concludes with an interesting development as the authors “encourage parishes to make free use” of PLF. This is risky, some might think irresponsible, given anyone using them may face legal action and the legal advice was clearly not final and has suggested that their use for certain relationships may indicate a departure from doctrine unless the bishops revoked some past statements. However, it highlights the strangeness of where we find ourselves. Commendation – the current proposed route – does not open up something previously prohibited. It simply encourages local clergy that if they use the commended forms of prayers then the bishops have said they think they are lawful to do so under canon B5. So, were the prayers to proceed no further or were they to be published not as formal Church of England prayers, but perhaps as prayers commended and published by a group of bishops and/or others, they could still be used legitimately if they could be used legitimately post-commendation. The recognition in the letter that this is the case raises the serious question as to why there is therefore such pressure to move quickly to a new stage rather than allowing time for a clearer and stronger consensus to emerge.

The future before us

The authors believe there is “a fairly clear journey ahead” but this fails to acknowledge how much is still unclear. This is also why portraying certain options (such as canon B2) as “rowing back” (language I’ve heard elsewhere) or “obstructive” are misguided and unfair. The question is how we row forward within the agreed commitment to the doctrine of the church. In particular, given the sharp rocks just below the surface in the form of differences over that doctrine and its implications, where do we row to avoid them and how quickly and how carefully do we have to proceed? To adapt

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the “walking together” language and change the metaphor we also need to ask – if the Church of England in reality is a number of different rowing boats progressing together, in what sense do we “row together” when some see it as essential to change our historic direction but others view the proposed new direction as sending us over a waterfall?

Related to this is whether these questions are simply to be decided – as the authors wish – by the House “only doing what they themselves have authority to do” or by the wider church as represented in General Synod. Here perhaps the concluding mischievous but important reference to 1 Cor 6 and lawsuits is relevant – Paul calls for disputes to be taken “before the Lord’s people” (6:1) not worldly judges. In the Church of England the synodical structures (not simply the episcopal House of Synod) and their due processes are the way to obey that injunction. One also presumes that, despite earlier statements to the contrary by some of them, the appeal to this passage means all signatories will now cease calling on Parliament to intervene.

One of the key areas still needing decision is that of the “form of Reassurance”. For many, the letter’s apparent limitation of this to “freedom of conscience” with no engagement concerning structural solutions will be far from reassuring. If there is “no desire to exclude anyone from the Church of England” will the authors be willing to explore these, as at least one of them has done informally in the past through [the St Hugh’s Conversations?](#)

The letter ends by highlighting what I too believe is one of the gifts of LLF – “the beginning of a move to a more honest Church”. There is still some considerable way to go in relation to this. Many have real concerns that there has been a lack of honesty at various stages in the process. In addition, whether among bishops, Synod members, or the various networks now writing letters, there is often, for example, still a lack of honesty and transparency about the nature and depth and significance of our differences. Two of these are signalled in the closing paragraphs. Firstly, there are real questions as to the extent – beyond the central, core baptismal profession of Christ as Lord – of “the faith we hold in common” and can mutually recognise in each other. In particular, given the consistent witness of Scripture concerning the importance of the body and warnings against sexual immorality, to contrast this common faith with, and characterise/caricature our differences simply as, “difficulties in agreeing on the significance of occasional contact between certain body parts” is hard to comprehend. Secondly, the letter appears to have a simplistic equating of a “wish to genuinely welcome LGBTQIA people” with the authors’ own convictions. In contrast, LLF was very clear that we should recognise that *all* wish to welcome and be inclusive but our differences are over what this means in practice. In particular, we disagree over what is the pattern of discipleship and transformation – disciplines that again *all* are committed to in principle given our baptismal profession – that we should offer and seek as the church.

If, as now seems inevitable, the Church of England is going to have to find ways to give greater recognised space for these differences over the patterns of welcome and transformation then the authors are right to say that we are moving “into a new phase of reception, which will be difficult in some places and for some people”. It is wrong, however, to suggest that it is only in evangelical and other traditional churches that there needs to be ongoing “deep engagement with the theological and personal questions raised by LLF” and with “diversity of convictions in congregations”. That is a reality all are should be facing honestly. One of the tragedies is that forcing decisions about PLF may well make this more difficult. I have, for example, heard of how it could threaten the unity of team ministries and, even where it does not do this, there may be significant “churn” as “conservatives” currently able to stay with a more “inclusive” team vicar may move to the more conservative congregation if their vicar uses PLF while more “inclusive” congregants may transfer away from a “conservative” vicar who on principle refuses to use PLF. I have also heard of a vicar supportive of the

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prayers but reliant in their team on the ministry and financial giving of several licensed lay ministers who may well move their ministry and giving elsewhere should PLF be introduced. The reality is that bringing in controversial developments when the church remains so deeply divided inevitably introduces different forms of visible differentiation or, worse, departures and divisions. Seeking to reduce that is one reason why we have historically required super-majorities within Synod (or referral also to diocesan Synods) on contentious issues. It also gives weight to calls that any reception of developments cannot make the novelty the new norm and default position of the church especially if there is less than two-thirds support for it. It needs instead to take the form of enabling those who are already committed to the proposed changes to being granted some recognised ecclesial structure within the Church of England which they can opt into while the wider church as a whole continues its discernment within the current doctrine and discipline but now aided by a structured but limited and differentiated reception process.

The writers of the letter are “committed to helping the Church discover its full diversity and beauty” and “have no desire to exclude anyone from the Church of England”. If, despite this, they are going to oppose processes such as canon B2 designed to assist unity and enable consensus, it makes it even more important that they and those of us who cannot walk in the direction they wish to go find ways to talk about how we navigate this “new phase of reception” and discern together “the future before us”.