

Time for a PLF/LLF “Reset”?: Reviewing 2023

Having been involved in Church of England and wider Anglican discussions around human sexuality and Anglican decision-making processes for over two decades, I realised as 2023 came to a close that I was probably more deeply concerned than ever about the state of the church. This related at least as much to *how* decisions were being made as *what* decisions were being made. Some of this assessment was confirmed by wider questions and patterns of behaviour concerning leadership and governance but because of my particular interests it was the handling of the Living in Love and Faith discernment and decision-making process which I knew best and where the multiple serious problems and failings were clearest to me. As we approach another meeting of the College and House of Bishops, a year on from the decisions about how to move forward, and with major questions still needing to be resolved, what follows seeks to set out my major concerns and the evidence for them in an overview of what happened during last year especially in the processes of the House of Bishops (with the two Archbishops and the Bishop of London in the lead) and General Synod.

How did we end up here?: The road to LLF 2023

Before exploring 12 key themes in broadly chronological order as they arose it is important to step back and remember the background. This was not an unexpected crisis or unforeseen challenge. This was a discernment and decision-making process painstakingly prepared for over a number of years through the development of careful, thorough, and theologically rich resources within [Living in Love and Faith \(LLF\)](#) and by means of encouraging wider church engagement with these. It related to matters where there were many lessons to be learned from how they have been handled in other churches, particularly but not solely other Anglican churches. It concerned important questions where the range of [biblical, theological, pastoral, ethical and ecclesiological issues and disagreements](#) were well mapped-out in LLF and the need for careful navigation of them evident. It was obvious to all that great care was needed because, even if handled sensitively and with wisdom through a process in which there was widespread confidence and respect for demonstrably competent leaders, there was a real danger of division and erosion of trust.

Already as 2023 began there were worrying signs – some public, some not – that the bishops were not going to handle this well. The amount of time they had originally given to focussed corporate discernment as to the direction to take had always been shockingly short particularly given the LLF resources had consciously chosen not to focus in on the hot, contentious questions. This was something Oliver O’Donovan had presciently warned against back in 2020 when concluding [his generally positive review of the LLF book](#): “The commission has worked with admirable patience. The church is being asked to learn new skills of mutual patience. It would be a tragedy if the whole attempt foundered on impatience in the House of Bishops”.

The decision to stick to the original short timetable, even after the death of Queen Elizabeth prevented the bishops’ first residential convening in September, was perhaps the first major worrying sign. There was also – in contrast to the earlier LLF process – no transparency as to how the process was being run or who was participating in it as it became clear that different groups had been hurriedly convened and were being required to rapidly produce new, never published, materials on complex issues for consideration by the bishops. By the time of their second and final December residential meeting no obvious consensus had emerged among the bishops and so the initial plan going into that meeting was, wisely, to use the February Synod to explore a number of different options concerning the way forward that the bishops had been considering. Such a next step would have continued the careful approach modelled by LLF by recognising the importance of wider discernment and the need to evaluate a range of options and their relative strengths and weaknesses rather than limiting the decision on what to propose only to bishops. It would also have been an unsurprising next step given the fact that (despite the suggestions of some of us involved in

it) the LLF process had drawn back from two key tasks: (i) mapping out (even if not evaluating) possible ways forward which might have some degree of theological coherence in the light of the book's exploration of the issues and (ii) considering in greater detail the ecclesiological challenges which would arise were there to be, as likely, a lack of consensus about which of those possible paths the church should pursue. Since the publication of the resources, the Next Steps Group had focussed on the church-wide learning process and not advanced work in these areas or addressed the legal and liturgical matters (also not considered in LLF despite being noted in its original remit). The bishops were therefore starting with limited resources on these crucial areas.

By January, however, that possibly more consensual way forward had all changed. The bishops (even though no prayers had been circulated in earlier meetings and they lacked final agreed texts of draft prayers when they met and signed off the proposal in January) rushed (reportedly on a show of hands not a careful vote on a formal motion) to put a specific proposal of Prayers and Love and Faith (PLF) before the Synod. This would entail a crude, binary "Yes or No" vote on the plan after an inevitably polarising debate and be introduced even without other major work, notably the Pastoral Guidance to replace [Issues in Human Sexuality](#), being completed. From almost the moment that January meeting ended things began to go wrong. Putting to one side whatever one makes of the specific proposals, over the rest of last year the whole process went from bad to worse in terms of proper processes, effective change management, paying attention to power, and wise and godly leadership. Taking them in turn chronologically as they arose, a dozen distinct but sometimes inter-related elements of this descent into increasing chaos can be identified. Their combination represents a catastrophic failure of leadership which, particularly if not addressed as the process moves forward in 2024, may well prove to have disastrous consequences for the future unity and health of the Church of England and Anglican Communion.

1. A leaky and secretive House of Bishops

Even before some bishops had got home from the January meeting there was [an unprecedented leak to the BBC](#) which highlighted the decision not to accept same-sex marriage. There were later [further selective leaks](#) in October of undeclared voting figures in both the College and House. Alongside this there has been increased concern about how little information the bishops have provided as to their own deliberations, advice received, and votes taken. This has focussed on their use - arguably abuse - [of Standing Order 14](#) to keep everything secret even when they are acting as Synod does and formally debating motions and amendments which determine the Church's position. There may be at times a need for strict confidentiality (eg one can imagine discussions during COVID of how the church might have to respond to projected worse case scenarios in terms of numbers of deaths). However, this lack of transparency is indefensible, increases pressure to leak (arguably as a form of whistleblowing in some cases) and further erodes trust and respect. It means there is still no public acknowledgment of key decisions that have been taken by the House through formal debates and votes which are relevant to Synodical decision making. It was process failings such as these that helped trigger [a dissenting statement after the House met in early October](#).

2. A focus on prayers but bypassing due synodical liturgical processes

It quickly became clear that while the doctrine of marriage remained unchanged the bishops were proposing to offer new liturgical resources in the form of Prayers of Love and Faith (PLF). This was the major shift from the earlier discernment process after the Shared Conversations which had been set out [six years earlier in GS 2055](#) (which Synod refused to take note of due to defeat in the House of Clergy). The claimed conformity of the draft form of PLF ([GS 2289](#)) to doctrine (notably in relation to blessings) was also not consistent with legal and other advice the bishops had been given in December. The bishops were also doing this without any serious theological rationale (the nearest being a new short and hurriedly written theology of blessing) despite it being a major development and Anglicans having such a close tie between liturgy and theology (*lex orandi, lex credendi*). As soon

became obvious, they were also not yet properly considering the various canonical routes they could use to introduce the new prayers or whether the prayers would prove to be indicative of a departure from doctrine (although they were clear that they should not be). In particular, they did not follow the standard, effectively constitutional, route for introducing contentious liturgical development - [synodical scrutiny under Canon B2](#). This was because they knew it would not get the necessary level of synodical support. Instead, the bishops proposed simply to commend the prayers for use under B5 which effectively meant saying that [nothing had changed](#) as these prayers have always been permissible for clergy to use despite past episcopal statements (never formally withdrawn with a correction as to their theological basis or an apology for them) rejecting the blessing of those in same-sex unions. This rushed proposal, without due diligence or process or [clarity as to the degree and strength of episcopal consensus behind it](#), would then be relentlessly pushed forward and vigorously defended throughout 2023 against all critiques even as it was also chopped and changed in various key respects by the bishops themselves.

3. Confusion over sexual ethics

Most surprisingly given it was a major focus of the LLF resources, lies at the heart of the disagreements within the church, and is crucial in relation to the use of any new prayers, the bishops decided to proceed in proposing prayers without clarifying whether or not they were also changing the church's teaching on sexual ethics. A number of statements in [the paper they presented to Synod](#) suggested they were revising that teaching and at this stage the prayers were also being proposed for opposite-sex as well as same-sex couples. This new sexual ethic, focussed on the qualities of a relationship not on whether it was a marriage between a man and a woman, was then strongly espoused by [the Archbishop of York who said](#) "what we are saying is that physical and sexual intimacy belongs in committed, stable, faithful relationships and therefore where we see a committed, stable, faithful relationship between two people of the same sex, we are now in a position where those people can be welcomed fully into the life of the Church, on their terms". This clear contradiction of current teaching which bishops promise to uphold raised the hopes of those advocating such a change and deeply concerned those committed to existing teaching making them even more suspicious of the proposed new prayers. It thus further polarised the binary choice bishops were now presenting in relation to PLF. As became clear, a change in ethic had not been agreed - or even discussed in depth - among the bishops. They would eventually reject the Archbishop's view and, frustrating those who believed he was signalling a change, reaffirm [in the Pastoral Guidance](#) that "It is within marriage that sexual intimacy finds its proper place". This was just the most serious - given it was an Archbishop publicly contradicting church teaching - of a number of significant errors in communicating what the bishops were and were not proposing at this initial stage. By the end of the year, the bishops appeared to be saying to those in same-sex unions that their relationship was not marriage (even if they claimed it was because it was a marriage in law) and so should not be sexual but that prayers could nevertheless now be used in regular church services for such couples including prayers for God's blessing on them.

4. Civil marriage and Holy Matrimony and changing legal advice

The bishops' defence of this development was based on a wholly novel and unprecedented sharp distinction being proposed between civil marriage and holy matrimony. This [soon came under attack](#) as it appeared to entail all civil marriages since the introduction of same-sex marriage were now marriage in the eyes of the church. After some pressure a summary of the legal advice backing up the bishops' argument was published ([GS Misc 1339](#)) but subjected to significant critique ([here](#), and then more fully, [here](#) in relation to law and [here](#) in relation to theology) which was never formally responded to by the bishops. As the year progressed, further legal and theological advice was given to the bishops and appears to have led to the retraction of this argument and some of the changes that the bishops then made to their proposals. Despite repeated requests however the bishops have failed to do as they did in January and make any later legal advice available more widely. Synod

members have no idea when legal advice was sought or by whom or on what matters nor when and with whom such advice was shared: The Archbishops? The Bishop of London? The Next Steps Group? The House? The whole College? Its obviously changing content, revising and/or retracting and replacing what was made public in January, is being kept secret. It is therefore very hard to make sense of what has happened or to believe that [the claim of the Bishop of London to the November Synod that “nothing is being hidden”](#) concerning legal advice relevant to matters before the Synod is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. In fact, it seems highly likely that significant legal advice has on one or more occasions been withheld from people with whom it should have been shared given their responsibilities in the church’s governance. It is noteworthy that the [draft prayers presented to Synod in February](#) included a legal note stating “The prayers and forms of service commended here are ‘neither contrary to, nor indicative of any departure from, the doctrine of the Church of England in any essential matter’ (including, but not limited to, the definition of Holy Matrimony in Canon B 30)” (p. 44). [In July](#) the legal note had been changed to read, “A Legal Note appropriate to the form of final approval, consonant with any relevant provisions in the Pastoral Guidance, will be supplied” (p. 27). In the final publication of the prayers and Pastoral Guidance there is no legal note.

5. Broken promises about prayers and guidance

Although no work had at this early stage been done on what would replace *Issues* in the new pastoral guidance, it was clearly promised [by the Next Steps Group on 1st February](#) that this was a temporary situation and dislocation: “The group reiterated that the Prayers and the Guidance belong together. The most public of these commitments was on the floor of Synod in February when [the Archbishop of York said](#)

I want to give you this pledge that I won't be able to vote, I won't be able to support commending these prayers when I hope we vote this through today. But I won't be able to support commending these prayers until we have the pastoral guidance and pastoral provision.

These statements made sense theologically given the interconnection of the different strands but they were made in the context of a belief that the guidance would be finalised before the end of the year and even by July. The Bishop of London had said [in January](#), “I think one of one of my regrets is that I couldn't be sitting here today and saying these are the pastoral guidance. But that's not where we are, we would hope that certainly by the time the Synod met in July, there would be clear pastoral guidance in place”. The Legal Office were also clear in January that “In reaching a final view on the legal position the Legal Office will need to see both the final draft of the Prayers and the replacement pastoral guidance” ([GS Misc 1339](#), para 10). On several occasions in [the February Synod](#) the Bishop of London spoke of the Prayers and Guidance belonging together (p.27; Q161, p.157) Plans to present a whole package were reaffirmed at various points and the Bishop of Berwick [told General Synod in July](#)

A decision about the Prayers has to wait for a decision about what the Pastoral Guidance is saying. Whatever the Pastoral Guidance says and what the Prayers say has to relate to what Pastoral Reassurance is needed as well. There is a complexity in how we do that, which is why we are needing to bring those groups together and that work together in the way we are now (p.245)

It increasingly became clear, however, that this was naively optimistic given the complexities and the divisions among bishops concerning the Guidance. The strategy then became one of dividing up the Guidance and not releasing the section replacing *Issues*, ignoring these promises, and illegitimately criticising those who sought to uphold them for “rowing back” and seeking to wreck the process. By

the November Synod the Archbishop of York's support for commendation made clear that his relationship with his public pledge nine months earlier was not permanent or faithful or stable.

6. Damage to the Anglican Communion

As many had predicted, these actions by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Church of England had serious repercussions in the Anglican Communion as evident from [the Ash Wednesday statement from the GSFA Primates](#) and [GAFCON's Kigali Commitment](#). At [General Synod in February](#) there had been an amendment from Busola Sodeinde which asked for "the Secretary General of the Synod to consult personally the Primate of each Province of the Anglican Communion about the potential impact of the proposals in GS 2289 on its relationship to the Church of England, the life of the Province and the effectiveness of their mission, and report on the outcome of those consultations for consideration by this synod before the prayers are commended". In a remarkable intervention the Archbishop challenged this on a technicality, stating that this work should be done instead by the Secretary General of the ACC and he would ask him to do it but no report of his findings was ever given to Synod. He also stated about the decision to be made: "It is about people who will die, women who will be raped, children who will be tortured, so when we vote we need to think of that. This is not just about what people say; it is what they will suffer... there is nothing in my life or heart or prayers that comes as high as the safety and the flourishing of the people I love in the Anglican Communion" and "we must do right here as part of the Church catholic" (pp. 276, 277). Archbishop Samy Shehata of Alexandria had clearly told Synod

Crossing this line of blessing same sex-unions will alienate 75% of the Anglican Communion and endanger the ecumenical and inter-faith dialogue. This shift in practice will lead eventually to an impaired and broken Communion. We inherited the traditional orthodox faith of the Church of England, so please, please, do not surrender your unique position as the mother church of the Anglican Communion. It is your choice. Thank you for listening to me (p. 334).

Nevertheless, the Archbishop of Canterbury then supported the final motion but shortly after Synod went to the ACC meeting where [he presented recent events in terms](#) of "When I speak of the impact that actions by the Church of England will have on those abroad in the Anglican Communion, those concerns are dismissed by many. Not all, but by many in the General Synod. And remember, that in the Church of England, Archbishops do not chair the General Synod and do not organise its business or its debates". The reality is that - [as Synod stated back in 2007](#) - "continuing efforts to prevent the diversity of opinion about human sexuality creating further division and impaired fellowship within the Church of England and the Anglican Communion...would not be advanced by doing 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)". What is not clear is whether the Archbishops and House for some reason no longer believed this to be the case and thought these departures from Communion teaching would cause little or no damage or whether they realised this was still the case but no longer really cared about greater division and impaired fellowship.

7. Flawed Implementation Groups

After General Synod passed the motion (though perhaps only because of a trust in the Cornes amendment ensuring the prayers would not indicate departure from doctrine and the promise of the Archbishop of York) three Implementation Groups were created. It was on being invited to join the group working on the Pastoral Guidance that I personally realised just how little confidence I now had in the integrity and usefulness of the process but I agreed to participate in the hope the groups represented a new and better way forward and possibly a return to the positive ways of working I had experienced in producing LLF. That hope was soon shattered. When a number of us raised our serious and specific concerns about the process in mid-May with Bishop Sarah and the Next Steps Group and asked for these to be relayed to the bishops we heard nothing back except a personal acknowledgment from one of the bishops on the group. In June, in one of the strangest CofE meetings I've ever attended, after spending a day planning our group's work over the summer and commenting on a draft report to Synod which spoke of the groups' continued work we were all told that we were being disbanded. Verbal and email statements concerning how we might continue to have a role in some form in the new structure were never followed up. Then [General Synod in July](#) was given a highly misleading answer from the Bishop of London to a question about the termination of the three groups when she justified this by claiming that "When the working groups were set up it was initially envisaged that they would be in place until Summer 2023, to report back to this Synod meeting, and a commitment was sought of members on this basis. While substantial and fruitful work has been done by the groups, it became clear that the work would continue beyond the original commitment made by members" (p. 193 answer to Q96). In fact, the letter of invitation members received had stated, "It is envisaged that the lifetime of this work will be from the end of March to the autumn of 2023. The exact timing will depend on what is brought to General Synod in July 2023, how it is received, and what further work remains to be done after July".

8. Poor treatment of theological questions and FAOC

It was only around the time of the July Synod that finally it was accepted by the House of Bishops that there were serious theological questions which needed to be considered by the Faith and Order Commission (FAOC) and it was invited to work on these, an earlier offer to help having been rebuffed. The difficulty here was that they were then asked to complete complex and contentious work (on the novel proposed distinction between civil marriage and holy matrimony and whether the church's sexual ethic could be considered simply teaching as distinct from doctrine and so changed while keeping marriage doctrine constant) in an unreasonably short space of time and with a clear expectation on the part of key players as to the answers that they should provide in order to justify the desired outcomes. Thankfully, the members of FAOC, across the diverse range of perspectives represented on that body concerning the matters of concern, were unwilling to sacrifice their high standards and reputation and made it clear that their work as always (and as demonstrated with the initial LLF process) required time and patience and iron-sharpening-iron academic debate and rigour. This was not always well received by those pushing for rapid implementation. This attitude to FAOC and theological work signalled for many a deeply concerning disregard in parts of the church's hierarchy of the need for serious theological reasoning to direct the discernment process. There seemed, instead, to be a preference for proceeding at speed on the basis of pragmatic political criteria such as the balance of power between competing perspectives among the bishops with no place for theology or a desire for theology being created to provide retrospective justification for decisions reached on other grounds. One of the consequences of all this is that, although the Bishop of Berwick [told Synod in July](#) that "the Pastoral Guidance will have a theological introduction to it. The work will have a theological introduction to it which will be grounded in Scripture. That will be the work that is being drafted over the next few months" when

finalised in December [the published Pastoral Guidance](#) simply said “it is not possible to make a consistent theological and pastoral argument in quite the same way as in Issues in Human Sexuality” and pointed anyone interested to Annex H in the November Synod papers ([GS 2328](#)) which does not contain much Scripture or explain or defend from Scripture either the church’s teaching on marriage and sexual intimacy or the change in relation to the church’s liturgy.

9. A return to non-transparency and hurried, unexplained changes

After disbanding the Implementation Groups, with their [publicly announced membership](#) and [terms of reference](#), the process again returned to the shadows of non-transparency but continued apace in order to secure release of the prayers as soon as possible despite no significant progress over the guidance to replace *Issues* or reassurance. Over the summer, in part due to pressure from the recently formed Alliance (such as [this letter](#) from July 3rd), plans to introduce the prayers through authorisation by the Archbishops ([canon B4.2](#) discussed [here](#)) that had been signalled to Synod in July were quietly abandoned. It was also at some point decided to separate off the suite of prayers from the service orders and claim the latter represented standalone services (another [novel and dubious argument](#) never really explained). While the plan now reverted to [commendation under B5](#) for the prayers, this would be said to apply only to use in regular services (though why parish clergy could not use this B5 discretion for a distinct service or why such controversial prayers were changes “not of substantial importance” as required by B5.1 were also never explained). The full proper synodical process of B2 was now accepted for separate standalone services much to the dismay of those pressing for change. More seriously, a combination of new, never-published or fully explained, legal and theological advice significantly undermined the original defence based on sharply distinguishing civil marriage from holy matrimony. A new rationale therefore had to be hurriedly developed. This took the form of pastoral provision (distinguished from pastoral accommodation) in a time of uncertainty ([see analysis here](#)). This change also meant that although the prayers were now being limited to use for same-sex couples it could no longer be required the couple were in a civil partnership or civil marriage. The decision not to change the church’s sexual ethic but to treat it as part of the doctrine of marriage also meant that it had to be admitted that “it would be difficult to say that making the PLF available for same-sex couples without there being an assumption as to their sexual relationships was not indicative of any departure from the Church’s doctrine” ([Annex A](#), para 17). These developments also made opening the ordained ministry to those in same-sex marriages or sexual relationships other than holy matrimony much more difficult to defend legally and theologically but despite this the draft pastoral guidance on these matters drawn up over the summer (though never published) made these changes, presumably on the basis that most bishops had indicated they wanted them. The bishops formally voted for a motion proposing this in October though again this decision has never been announced, only leaked. With limited time and scrutiny internally, these multiple changes were implemented and announced in [GS 2328](#) for the November Synod but with no clear narrative describing these various developments, let alone a clear explanation or defence of their logic and how or why they had taken place.

10. Episcopal flip-flops over experimental services (canon B5A)

The decision to separate off “standalone” services and consider those under B2 meant a long delay (and also likely failure at the end of the process given the need for two-thirds in all 3 synodical Houses). It was therefore planned to combine this with the Archbishops authorising such services under Canon B5A on an experimental basis. This, according to leaked figures, was strongly supported by the College in September although it is unclear if this was based on any theological or legal advice (none has been made public) or simply the majority’s desire for such services as soon as possible once they had for some reason become detached from the commendation of the suite of prayers as originally proposed. It is indisputable that using B5A to introduce new and contentious liturgy is unprecedented and many would argue it is in fact unlawful and certainly creates a high risk of legal challenge (see [discussion of B5A here](#)). The Bishop of London [explained this decision to use B5A and](#)

[then B2 as the bishops' plan](#) to a large number of groups in a number of meetings (one of which I attended) only a week before the House met to agree the plans. However, at the meeting in early October she for some reason instead proposed a motion going straight to B2 without use of B5A. This was narrowly passed after being given strong support from the Archbishop of Canterbury. Once announced, this sudden and unexplained change of plan (combined with the other developments noted above) understandably led to consternation from those wishing change given previous statements (see, for example, [Charlie Bell](#) and [my sympathy with his and others' concerns](#)). By the November Synod, both Archbishops and the Bishop of London had again changed their position and now strongly supported exploring use of experimental services as advocated by the Bishop of Oxford. The passing of the amendment (though with no guidance offered to Synod as to the legal and logistical challenges it raises and by the narrowest of margins possible among the laity) has sent this back to the bishops for further consideration and, who knows, perhaps another *volte face*.

11. A lack of reassurance

Although “pastoral reassurance” and more recently “formal structural pastoral provision” has been an integral part of discussions since February (when the Archbishop of York supported in Synod the need for a settlement) remarkably little progress has been made on this aspect. The bishops seem to have a considerable contingent, possibly a majority, which is sceptical about or fundamentally opposed to any form of structural provision. Those holding this position seemingly believe that the significant proportion of the church unhappy at bishops and Archbishops contradicting church teaching and who are unwilling to accept the introduction of liturgy indicative of a departure from doctrine through bypassing the standard synodical process simply need to accept this (and any further changes) and carry on as if nothing significant has happened. Particularly concerning has been the fact that, despite some bishops who support such developments being party to [the St Hugh's conversations](#) focussing on these matters for a number of years they have not shown support for conservatives by stressing the importance and urgency of this. The Bishop of Oxford, having initially supported quite radical provision in late 2022 (“some alternative system of episcopal oversight may well be required to enable a differentiation of ministries, such as an alternative province and structure within the Church of England or a system of oversight from a neighbouring diocese”) has since not only failed to work for this but voted against amendments in Synod (from Vaughan Roberts and the Bishop of Durham) pressing for it. This raises serious questions as to whether those bishops and others who participated in such conversations really were listening and engaging in good faith and, if they were, what evidence there is of this in their conduct over the last year when these issues have been discussed. In short, for those seeking what they were told should be called simply “pastoral reassurance” the whole handling of this aspect has not been experienced as pastoral and has often been the exact opposite of reassuring in effect.

12. Getting PLF done: Bulldozing through Synod

Finally, the determination to push the prayers “over the line” at the November General Synod led to yet more serious concerns about the methods being used. This began when the Archbishop of York used his Presidential address to support the Oxford amendment reversing the House’s decision on experimental services rather than waiting for the debate to express his views. It continued with a fraught Question Time focussed on the PLF process. The Bishop of London was, as noted above, then less than transparently honest during the debate in [her comments about legal advice being withheld](#) and at one point rejected language of “differentiation” and inaccurately and offensively associated this terminology with language used to justify apartheid in South Africa. She also resisted amendments which were simply seeking to keep commitments she and others had made to proceed with prayers only alongside guidance and reassurance. Most disappointingly, she even resisted the Bishop of Durham’s moderate amendment in relation to provision. This was reportedly because of her concerns (perhaps based on strong evidence from Synod members) that if it passed then those supportive of change would join conservatives in voting down the final motion because of their

opposition to such provision. There was also at no point any acknowledgment let alone apology that the proposals were now recognised to be incompatible with the Cornes amendment and the bishops' previous commitment (restated in [their paper to Synod in July](#), para 20) not to introduce prayers indicative of a departure from doctrine. The final voting made clear just how far the bishops' original claim to have found a consensual way of walking together now fell short of the reality. The majorities were [smaller in all three Houses](#) despite the proposals in some ways representing less change. This was perhaps in part because of the multiple failures in the process sketched above. These meant that the bishops were not only failing, in the eyes of many, to show how their innovations were, in substance, compatible with Scripture and Tradition. They seemed also to many to be disregarding reason in a process where the widespread experience was one of chaos, disorder, and broken promises rather than demonstrably following due process and acting in ways that appeared "in all things legal and honest".

Conclusion

It is almost inevitable, given how close we are to events, the complexity of the issues and processes, and how rapid and often lacking in transparency, developments in the last year have been, that some of the account above is at best incomplete and perhaps even inaccurate. I am therefore very happy to be corrected in any aspect of it. The breadth and depth of the problems highlighted are, however, so great that even if incompleteness or inaccuracy prove to be the case for a significant proportion of the account offered above there would remain serious concerns about what has become of the LLF process and how the bishops collectively and some bishops individually have acted in the last year.

We began 2023 with claims that the bishops had discovered something that represented "finding a point that each of us, by stretching out our arm, can touch and reach the fingertips of the other" and so "creating a space for the Holy Spirit to move among us and to continue to guide us and shape us into the likeness of Christ" ([Bishop of London](#), February Synod). We now find ourselves, at the start of 2024, with a Synod split almost straight down the middle, increasingly serious and public fractures among the bishops, a significant and perhaps growing number of people feeling "compelled to resist" including many who have kept clear of this disagreement until now, and a still far from complete LLF process which in terms of both ends and means many now believe to be theologically and legally incoherent and politically unsustainable in its present form. Since early in the original LLF process, at least one senior voice argued that it would likely lead to an outcome where perhaps 10% on either side would be unhappy and may leave the CofE but the 80% in the middle would be content and carry on with whatever was agreed. We instead seem to be risking losing 10% or more on either side (both have already lost people with others only just hanging in) but having those who remain split into two almost equal opposed groupings, [with neither of them really wanting what is on offer](#).

With [the arrival of the Bishops of Newcastle and Leicester as the two new episcopal Co-Chairs](#) (though it remains unclear what group, if any, they are now chairing) there has been encouraging talk of the need for a "reset". The release of [fuller notes of recent House of Bishops meetings](#) (though not for the crucial and controversial October 9th meeting which led to a dissenting statement from a number of bishops) is a promising sign in relation to the first area highlighted above that this may be underway. It is, however, clear that there is much, much more that needs to be done if trust and confidence in this process is going to be rebuilt across a deeply divided church after what (despite it regularly being claimed that a problem with bishops today is that they are too managerial) has often appeared [a classic "omnishambles"](#). The Archbishops and bishops also need, going forward, to be much more obviously following the Pastoral Principles, particularly that which highlights the need to ["pay attention to power"](#).

One fundamental problem has been a sense that, although it swerved around at times like the proverbial shopping trolley, the process was being determinedly driven inexorably to achieve certain ends (new prayers and services, permitting clergy to enter same-sex marriage while claiming to leave doctrine unchanged). To reach those goals, law and theology have often seemingly been pushed to the margins and ignored or looked to in order to provide rapidly constructed novel justifications and rationales for decisions made on the basis of being the will of a majority of bishops expressed in secret, generally unannounced, and often supposedly only indicative, episcopal votes. Due constitutional synodical processes have been bypassed simply because they would fail to secure the desired outcome, and the Houses of both Clergy and Laity have become even more divided and fall well short of the two-thirds consensus usually required for controversial changes precisely in order to preserve church unity. Proper consideration of the nature and seriousness of our theological differences (so [carefully explored by the LLF resources](#)) has been studiously avoided and replaced instead with appeals to being in “a time of uncertainty” (rather than competing and irreconcilable near-certainties) and “living with difference” and calls for “generosity” and “unity”. The way these are presented effectively imposes the decision that all these matters are *adiphora*. All this seems to many to entail a lack of honesty, realism and integrity about people’s deeply held but divergent theological convictions and be introducing a practical abandonment of the church’s doctrine even as that doctrine is, officially and verbally, but only theoretically and never practically, reaffirmed.

As we enter the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity we need to be honest about how damaging the handling of PLF/LLF in 2023 has been to our unity in the Church of England and the Anglican Communion. The tragedy is that this damage is likely to continue and deepen and we risk in the year ahead finding ourselves continuing to dig still deeper the hole we are now in. What we need is a genuine and bold “reset”. This must properly acknowledge how serious the multiple errors were in this evolving process during 2023, effectively address the underlying problems such as those identified here, and perhaps thereby enable us – across our differences – to seek and find a better way forward in addressing the many still unresolved PLF/LLF questions in 2024.