



BIRMINGHAM DIOCESAN SYNOD (DS)

Saturday 29 June 2024 at 9.30am

St John's & St Peter's Church, Darnley Rd, Ladywood, Birmingham B16 8TF

MINUTES

1. Prayers and Welcome

Prayers were led by Mr Charles George, Church Warden at St John's & St Peter's Church, Ladywood.

2. Welcome to New People, Apologies and Previous Minutes

Bishop Michael announced that this session would be the last one of the current triennium. Notices of election to the Houses of Clergy and Laity of the new Diocesan Synod were issued in May this year, however, elections were not required as the number of available places was greater than the nominations received. Therefore, those who submitted a nomination have been duly elected to the new Diocesan Synod. There will another call for elections in September to fill any remaining vacancies before the first meeting of the new Diocesan Synod takes place in November.

Following an election to fill the casual vacancy in the House of Clergy of General Synod, Bishop Michael was delighted to announce that the Revd Emma Sykes had been elected and will now serve as a representative of the Diocese for the remainder of the General Synod Quinquennium 2021-2026. Thanks were given to all candidates who offered themselves for service in this way and to the time and effort that has been given during the course of this election.

The Revd Emma Sykes led thanks from the Diocesan Synod Members to Bishop Anne who was attending Synod for the final time. Bishop Anne was thanked for leading with great wisdom and calmness, humility and grace, particularly with acknowledgment to all she held with a national and a diocesan focus during her tenure as Acting Diocesan Bishop.

Bishop Michael noted the apologies given before the meeting. No further amendments to the Minutes of DS 240316 had been received so they stand as agreed by Bishop's Council.

RESOLUTION: The Diocesan Synod approved the Minutes of DS 240316

3. Bishop's Presidential Briefing

Bishop Michael gave his Presidential Briefing, a copy of which is attached to the Minutes.

4. Education at the Heart of the Church's Mission

Dean Matt, Chair of Diocesan Board of Education (DBE), presented a report from the DBE. He explained that a new requirement of the DBE Measure is to report to Diocesan Synod on an annual basis.

His report delivered background information about the focus of the DBE, the mission and ministry to these schools, Board Structure, Officers team and the work the DBE engages in.

Ms Sarah Smith, Director of Education, then presented a summary to date, in reference to the DBE's 3 year business plan key priorities, including discussion of the encouraging work that is bearing fruit with the Leading for Equity Programme, which is addressing the diversity of our schools' senior leadership. Sarah concluded with notes on a piece of work in progress inviting School governing bodies to review the content of their admissions policies and to consider removing faith-based criteria, noting that our schools were set up to provide free education for all rather than having faith/church attendance as a qualifier for pupil's acceptance.

Members noted that new members would be appointed to the DBE in the autumn and those with experience as either a governor or having worked in schools were encouraged to submit their nomination.

The DBE business plan will focus on delivering the priorities of the DBE measure, and will include focused work on racial justice, Net Zero, flourishing schools and academisation.

A copy of the presentation is attached to the Minutes.

Bishop Michael thanked Dean Matt and Sarah and invited continued prayer for the team and this significant work.

5. Safeguarding

Ms Steph Haynes, Diocesan Safeguarding Adviser, and Ms Claire Wesley, Safeguarding Learning & Development Officer, gave a progress report on national developments in safeguarding in The Church of England. A copy of the presentation is attached to the Minutes.

It was reported that Lis Fisher's has stepped down from her role as Independent Chair of our Diocesan Safeguarding Advisory Panel, having chaired the panel for many years. We are grateful for her leadership and service. At Easter a new Independent Chair was appointed. Geoff Taylor-Smith has many years of experience in social care and is also the Chair of Worcester's DSAP. Geoff was warmly welcomed at Synod.

An update was given on the IICSA recommendations. Most of them focus on revising church structures to improve transparency and accountability and improving the way we engage with and respond to those with lived experience of abuse. The project exploring the most effective methods of implementing these recommendations in the Church has concluded and the preferred models are in the process of being implemented. Legislation was passed to ensure the role of Diocesan Safeguarding Adviser as it has been known, should become Diocesan Safeguarding Officer - an officer role with responsibility for safeguarding rather than an adviser to the diocesan bishop. This change plus a regional model with professional supervision for DSOs is being rolled out.

Good progress has been made towards establishing a redress scheme for victims and survivors. Kennedys Law has been appointed as scheme administrator and a financial award framework and approach to funding will be considered at General Synod in July. An information sharing framework has been in place with the police for over a year.

In response to another IICSA recommendation, a national programme of external audit across the whole of the Church of England began at the end of 2023 with The Ineqe Safeguarding Group being appointed by the Archbishop's Council to conduct the audits. The Church of England Birmingham audit will be in February 2028.

One of the IICSA recommendations was to develop a set of national standards and a quality assurance framework for safeguarding across all areas of the Church of England. The standards and the framework to assess the progress dioceses and parishes make towards achieving them were published in autumn 2023. The Diocesan Safeguarding Team are currently assessing where they are in relation to these frameworks and developing a strategy, acknowledging progress already made, for further implementation.

Good progress has been made with parishes using the dashboard. Particular thanks were given to Archdeacon Jenny and all the Area Deans for promoting the dashboard with their parishes and extra special thanks to parishes themselves for responding and working so hard on their dashboards.

The Safeguarding Hub was introduced to Synod members last year. This is a tool that a parish can add to their Dashboard to help with the national safer recruitment procedures and keeping track of training and DBS records for volunteers. The Safeguarding Team are immensely grateful to parishes for embracing this and being so willing to sign up to the Hub. 62 parishes are using the Hub and a big difference can already be seen in understanding and awareness at parish level of the requirements for individual roles and ensuring that our volunteers are up to date. Parishes not yet signed up to the Hub yet were encouraged to get involved.

The Revd Toby Crowe, Chair of the House of Clergy asked for an update on the Jay Report. Dr Jan Smart responded that it has been acknowledged that the Church of England is a complex organisation and the review group needs to give further scrutiny and consideration to the report before a proposal is submitted to General Synod.

The Revd Ali Herbert (Handsworth & Central deanery) noted the number of case referrals in the diocese and asked if growing awareness resulted in a rise in cases. Steph responded that there has been a change in culture and enquiries about safe practice is rising. Giving advice is a vital part of what the Safeguarding Team do and is missing from the Jay Report.

Mr Anesu Muyambi (Handsworth & Central deanery) reiterated the importance of safeguarding. Parishioners want to feel safe and church leaders have a role to play to execute this and create safe culture.

To conclude this item, Synod members were asked to form discussion groups and to consider how parishes are interacting with the new National Safeguarding Standards. Feedback was also sought on how the CofEB Safeguarding team could support with their implementation.

Bishop Michael thanked Steph and Claire for the presentation and for their diligent, considerate work in this area.

RESOLUTION: The Diocesan Synod adopted the following motion put forward by the President:

This Synod adopts the following House of Bishops' Safeguarding Policies and Practice Guidance

- **Safeguarding Practice Reviews (2023)**
- **Safeguarding Guidance for Local Ecumenical Partnerships (2023)**

The documents can be viewed on the national safeguarding e-manual at:

<https://www.churchofengland.org/safeguarding/safeguarding-e-manual>

6. Oversight Area Formation and Mission Planning Update

The Ven Jenny Tomlinson, Archdeacon of Birmingham, the Revd Canon Dr Mark Pryce, Director of Ministry and Mr Andy Windmill, Director Mission & Support gave an update on Oversight Area Formation and Mission Planning. A copy of their presentation is attached to the Minutes.

They spoke about how the various areas of support being delivered to the newly formed Oversight Areas complement each other and bring their missional heart into focus in all that we do together, concluding with a prayerful reading of the Declaration of Assets in reference to the focus of mission, *'To proclaim afresh to each generation.'*

Members noted that 40 of an expected 43 Oversight Areas have now been formally agreed with Oversight Ministers appointed by the Bishop to 30 of them. This represents 135 parishes. 13 of these Oversight Areas have taken part in Formation Days and a further 7 are booked in.

Mr John Heywood (Aston & Sutton Coldfield deanery) asked if lay leaders are emerging from parishes to take part in the process. Archdeacon Jenny responded that incumbents are invited to bring to the formation days those who have an overview of who is already involved in the parish. Mark added the importance of parishes coming together, building relationships and focusing on rest and spirituality.

The Revd Katie Stock (Warley & Edgbaston deanery) asked about the impact on diocesan resource and stipendiary clergy and whether deployment was based on taking part in Oversight Areas. Mark responded that there was not a conditional element and that there are various criteria related to the allocation of clergy and curates. Oversight is a key part of the direction of mission and ministry in our diocese and will factor into the deployment of resources but it is not the only component.

Bishop Michael gave his thanks to Archdeacon Jenny, Mark and Andy for their presentation.

7. Regional Racial Justice Board

The Revd Bamidele Sotonwa, Chair of the CofEB Racial Justice Board, and Dawn Brathwaite, member of the CofEB Racial Justice Board gave a presentation on setting the priorities for the CofEB Racial Justice Board and key areas of activities for engaging with in order to drive change. A copy of their presentation is attached to the Minutes.

The Board is looking to use these priorities as a basis for how CofEB Racial Justice work collaborates with the WM Regional Racial Justice initiative. Accountability is strongly embedded in the Board's plans, and the seeking to make the practice of racial justice 'business as usual' within the 6 dioceses and model this best practice further afield. The CofEB Racial Justice Board is currently consulting widely across the CofEB, gathering feedback to influence the work they are doing, and to help finalise priorities at their September meeting. A commissioning service at Coventry Cathedral for the WM Regional Racial Justice team is being planned for 6 October 2024.

Dele and Dawn ended by requesting prayer for every aspect of the work, including the Regional programme, the CofEB Board and the Operational team and that we see real, deep, timely and lasting change.

The Revd Toby Crowe, Chair of the House of Clergy, felt confident that this time there would be change, however, after a long history of proposals he asked what was different that would lead to this change. Dawn responded that she felt there was real heart for change this time round and that we now have the resources to reach the right people and parishes. The world is a different place and people are more vocal and engaging more deeply. There is a strategic approach and taken collectively, she was optimistic that this would drive change.

The Revd Catherine Grylls (Kings Norton, Moseley & Shirley deanery) was encouraged to see some theology being undertaken and would like to see the theology being shared.

Mr Anesu Muyambi (Handsworth & Central deanery) noted that looking around Synod today, there was about 6 ethnic minority representatives out of a possible 60. The problem is not with our church leadership, the problem lies at the church grassroots level, our PCC selection criteria. If we don't include the minority in our PCC, the church leadership will not be able to do anything about it. If there was enough ethnic minority representatives in Synod, we could then challenge the church leadership about their selection criteria.

Bishop Anne, who has been deeply involved in supporting our Racial Justice work, gave her thanks to Dele and Dawn for their fantastic work and said she would continue to hold this in her prayers. This will only go forward if we embed this in every part of our lives.

Mr Guy Hordern (General Synod Representative) gave his warmest thanks to Dele and Dawn for their presentation. He noted that Christian leaders have been actively working on this for the last two years and he asked if consideration had been given to involve other Christian denominations in Birmingham. Dawn responded that this was their intention, however, priorities need to be established first along with liaison with the operational team.

Bishop Michael thanked Dele, Dawn and the CofEB Racial Justice Board for all their work.

8. Promulgation of Amending Canon No. 43

RESOLUTION: Promulgation of Amending Canon No. 43

The President:

I give notice that, at its February 2024 group of sessions, the General Synod resolved that Amending Canon No. 43 be made, promulgated and executed.

Amending Canon No. 43 makes miscellaneous amendments to the Canons of the Church of England. It complements the Church of England (Miscellaneous Provisions) Measure 2024.

9. Annual General Meeting of the Birmingham Diocesan Board of Finance

Members of the Diocesan Synod make up the membership Birmingham Diocesan Board of Finance and this section of the Synod meeting was given over to the formal AGM of the Birmingham Diocesan Board of Finance.

The DBF Chair, Mr Steven Skakel sent his apologies and Dr Jan Smart, Diocesan Secretary, chaired the AGM in his absence. Jan gave her thanks to everyone who had been involved in producing the 2023 Annual Report. In particular, she encouraged members to read the front part of the report which gives an overview of the activity across the diocese in the last year.

The main item of business was the adoption of the 2023 Annual Report & Accounts.

Ms Karen Preece, Director of Finance, gave a presentation setting out the key highlights of the 2023 results. A copy of her presentation is attached to the Minutes.

It had been another difficult year, for the 4th year in a row (since the Covid pandemic) the BDBF delivered an operating deficit. Sustainability funding from the Church Commissioners covered this for 2020-2022. For 2023, we were required to dig into our own reserves to cover the £799,000 deficit and we expect to have to do the same for both 2024 and 2025. These funds had been designated for missional activities before the pandemic. Bishop's Council had, once again, been required to carefully consider whether the BDBF would be a going concern for the next 18 months before approving the accounts and their conclusions were then signed off by our auditors. The 2023 DBF Annual Report is available here to [view online](#).

The Revd Catherine Grylls (Kings Norton, Moseley & Shirley deanery) thanked Karen for her clear presentation and asked how reserves being held in different dioceses might be shared. Jan Smart responded that there has been a change with the national

church and she sensed that the voices of Bishops and Diocesan Secretaries are being listened to with regards to how richer dioceses might be able to help the poorer ones. Oxford diocese recently gave a modest grant to the poorest dioceses and Birmingham was one of the beneficiaries.

The Revd Dr Al Barrett (Coleshill & Polesworth deanery) raised a concern that if projections became a reality, at what point would the diocese not be a Going Concern. Karen responded that the diocese has £5m of investment and a small number of assets. We are being pro-active and are working on a plan with the Church Commissioners and assessing the situation now – not waiting until the money runs out. Jan added that many dioceses are facing deficits but many have more assets to rely on in the short to medium term. The Church Commissioners will not provide the level of unconditional support we had in the immediate aftermath of Covid, but there are very positive moves towards long term partnership approaches and we are working hard to be in a position to apply for funding.

Bishop Michael and the Diocesan Secretary thanked Karen and her team for their outstanding work in managing the finances of the diocese through these very difficult times.

RESOLUTION: The Diocesan Synod approved the minutes of the 2023 AGM.

RESOLUTION: The Diocesan Synod adopted the following motion: This 77th Annual General Meeting of the Birmingham Diocesan Board of Finance adopts the Annual Report and Financial Statements of the Company for the year ended 31 December 2023, together with the Independent Auditor's Report thereon.

RESOLUTION: The Diocesan Synod adopted the following motion: Haysmacintyre LLP to be appointed as Auditor to the Board and that the Directors be authorised to fix their remuneration.

10. Questions

10.1a Question from the Revd Dr Al Barrett (Coleshill & Polesworth deanery)

In the recent diocesan election for the casual vacancy on General Synod (House of Clergy), a hustings event was planned for just two days before the voting deadline, and then cancelled at the last minute. These two factors significantly reduced the opportunity for engagement between electors and candidates, and significantly impaired the democratic process. Please can you (1) let us know who was consulted in the decision to cancel; and (2) give assurances that in future elections, hustings events will be organised for near the start of the voting period, and that every effort will be made to avoid cancellation.

10.1b Answer from Dr Jan Smart, Diocesan Secretary

Although there is no requirement to do so, we wanted to offer the opportunity for the electorate to engage with the candidates via hustings. Information about the timing of the hustings was communicated at the start of the election process when nomination forms were issued. Out of the electorate of over 175, only 8 people confirmed their attendance at the planned hustings, despite several reminders being sent in the lead-up to the event. Because of the disappointing lack of interest from the electorate, the Diocesan Secretary, as Presiding Officer, with the support of the Bishop, made the decision to cancel the event. We will continue to offer hustings in future elections and hope to see a greater level of interest from the electorate.

The Revd Dr Al Barrett thanked Jan for her answer, however, (1) he felt that members would not have realised the impact of not responding to the invitation to the hustings event and (2) ensuring that hustings will be organised near the start of the voting period would result in a more effective plan of engagement.

Dr Jan Smart responded that his points would be taken on board, however, on this occasion the timing of the Revd Tim Bateman's resignation and the date of the next session of General Synod meant that the coordination of diaries had been challenging.

11. Meeting Dates 2023 followed by The Blessing

Members of the Diocesan Synod noted the meeting dates for 2024:

- Saturday 16 November 2024 at 9.30am

On behalf of Diocesan Synod, Bishop Michael thanked members of St John's & St Peter's Church for hosting the meeting.

Synod adjourned at 1pm with prayers led by Bishop Michael followed by the Blessing.

Summary of Resolutions

Agenda Item	Resolution
2.	The Diocesan Synod approved the Minutes of DS 240316
5.	<p>The Diocesan Synod adopted the following motion put forward by the President:</p> <p>This Synod adopts the following House of Bishops' Safeguarding Policies and Practice Guidance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safeguarding Practice Reviews (2023) • Safeguarding Guidance for Local Ecumenical Partnerships (2023) <p>The documents can be viewed on the national safeguarding e-manual at: https://www.churchofengland.org/safeguarding/safeguarding-e-manual</p>
8.	<p>Promulgation of Amending Canon No. 43</p> <p>The President:</p> <p><i>I give notice that, at its February 2024 group of sessions, the General Synod resolved that Amending Canon No. 43 be made, promulgated and executed.</i></p> <p><i>Amending Canon No. 43 makes miscellaneous amendments to the Canons of the Church of England. It complements the Church of England (Miscellaneous Provisions) Measure 2024.</i></p>
9.	The Diocesan Synod approved the minutes of the 2023 AGM.
9.	The Diocesan Synod adopted the following motion put forward by the Chair of the DBF: This 77th Annual General Meeting of the Birmingham Diocesan Board of Finance adopts the Annual Report and Financial Statements of the Company for the year ended 31 December 2023, together with the Independent Auditor's Report thereon.
9.	The Diocesan Synod adopted the following motion put forward by the Chair of the DBF: Haysmacintyre LLP to be appointed as Auditor to the Board and that the Directors be authorised to fix their remuneration.

Presidential Address to Diocesan Synod

29 June 2024

Rt Rev Dr Michael Volland

I speak to you 150 days after arriving in the diocese. It has been a period of warm welcome, exciting discovery and fruitful activity. There has been much to learn and understand, and this, of course, continues. I have experienced a good deal of joy and significant encouragements. It has been wonderful to meet and begin getting to know people in congregations and communities across the diocese.

A glimpse at the diary tells me that I have:

- **Presided** and/or preached at 40 services, including 25 Eucharists, 7 Confirmations with 55 confirmed and 15 baptised, 6 Licensings and 6 deanery welcomes
- **Visited** 62 clergy in their homes
- **Hosted** events, meetings and interviews at Bishop's Croft, including a reception for many of the head teachers of our 52 church schools, the annual diocesan staff barbeque, meetings of Area Deans, Bishop's staff, General Synod reps, Honorary Assistant Bishops, and all of our pre-BAP and pre-ordination candidates.
- **Chaired** 3 Bishop's Councils and 2 Diocesan Synods
- **Attended** Racial Justice Board meetings, an Away Day and a Consultation
- **Recruited** a Bishop's Chaplain and an Archdeacon of Aston
- **Attended** various meetings of the College and House of Bishops, February General Synod (July to come), a regional bishop's residential, an inspirational Interfaith reception (credit to Andrew Smith and others), alongside a variety of receptions and meetings for Christian leaders in the city and region
- **Met** Council Leader John Cotton, (meeting Andy Street in a couple of weeks).
- **Run 515km**, including the Great Birmingham Run, in which almost £1500 was raised for the Safe Sleep scheme.

Even as I give thanks for an encouraging start, our reps and I are preparing for the July General Synod, and I am looking forward to ordaining new priests and deacons, licensing the incoming Archdeacon of Aston and a new Area Dean for Yardley and Solihull. In addition, I look forward to increased personal involvement and leadership in our work on racial justice, and also to continuing to discern biblical and theological underpinnings for our Transforming Church vision and the desire to see growing churches at the heart of each community. More on that shortly...

A word on the imminent General Election in relation to which, as Christians in Church of England Birmingham, we have much to pray about and encouragement to offer in several

directions. A short while ago, church leaders in the West Midlands issued a joint statement. In it we recognised the sacrifices made by those who serve in political office, and we encouraged Parliamentary candidates to commit to working to erase systematic poverty. We urged them to commit to building an immigration system that operates with compassion, justice, transparency and speed, and encouraged them to commit to supporting efforts to create an environmentally sustainable future.

We offered encouragement to everyone to exercise their democratic right to express their opinion through the ballot box and we urged all to engage in a spirit of respect, truth and kindness. As the General Election approaches, I continue to encourage all in Church of England Birmingham to commit to praying for Parliamentary candidates as well as for the region and wider nation. Going beyond the content of the joint statement, we might add our prayerful encouragement to those who will occupy political office to be proactive in speaking up for a de-escalation of armed conflict around the world and to be active in encouraging reconciliation, peace-making and the building of hopeful futures. I pray that our engagement with and around the election might be salt and light in our communities and a powerful witness to Jesus Christ.

On the Feast of St Barnabas, The Reverend Emma Sykes invited me to preach at, you've guessed it, St Barnabas Church, Erdington. Preparing the sermon offered me the surprising opportunity to reflect more broadly on the principles underpinning the ministry and mission in which Church of England Birmingham is engaged. In fact the text went even beyond this, and provided a prompt about how we might choose to view the financial challenges currently facing the diocese.

I have shared this since with the Bishop's Staff Team and Bishop's Council but make no apologies to those who have already heard this once, twice or even three times, as it's of real importance.

Bear with me while I read the passage from Acts 11 (19-26)

¹⁹ Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews. ²⁰ But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus. ²¹ The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord. ²² News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³ When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion; ²⁴ for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord. ²⁵ Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for

Saul, ²⁶ and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they associated with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians'.

A diocese who are actively praying to receive the gift of, 'growing churches at the heart of each community' will immediately note that in this passage we hear twice, that '*a great number became believers and were brought to the Lord*'.

The five points I drew attention to in my sermon were that in the passage we notice that the disciples were:

- **Focused on the Lord Jesus** (v.20, '*proclaiming the Lord Jesus*')
- **Empowered by the Spirit** (v.21, '*The hand of the Lord was with them...*)
- **Attentive to what God is doing** (v.23, '*Barnabas came and saw*')
- **Joyful** (v.23, '*he rejoiced*')
- **Hope-filled** (v.20, '*he exhorted them*' – which is impossible without hope)

As we continue to pursue our vision of Transforming Church, seeking to encourage and enable, 'growing churches at the heart of every community', and to respond appropriately to the current financial challenges, I suggest we could do well to give thought to what practical form these principles might take in the parishes, oversight areas and chaplaincies of CofE Birmingham.

Focusing for a moment on our financial challenges, the passage continues in this way:

²⁷ At that time prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world; and this took place during the reign of Claudius. ²⁹ The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea; ³⁰ this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul. (Acts 11: 27-30)

In these verses we notice the following:

- The church find themselves in a time of great need
- The need is acknowledged
- The disciples take personal responsibility
- Relief is provided via financial giving from their own resources

I recognise the theological risks of pasting the response of the early church to a first-century famine onto our own thinking about the diocesan deficit. However, I contend that here in the living word of God, we find an encouraging principle. But a principle that is also quite

challenging for us. We are in a time of significant financial need – a need which we have acknowledged and which we will hear more about in the AGM of the Diocesan Board of Finance later in this meeting. We believe that the ministry and mission in which we are engaged in parishes and oversight areas across the diocese is precious to God and valuable to those whose lives are touched and blessed by it. We have taken a degree of responsibility – we recognise something must be done, and gifted people are working hard on what this looks like. But, emboldened by this passage, I suggest that more responsibility might be taken by the disciples here in CofE Birmingham. This financial challenge is ours to meet. Relief will come as churches across the diocese prayerfully and with glad hearts, give from their own resources to meet the need this year and in the years to come.

The Synod reps and I are preparing for General Synod, which will take place next week in York. The agenda is full and varied. It includes a presentation and an afternoon session on Living in Love and Faith. I thought it might be helpful for me to share some thoughts with Diocesan Synod in relation to my own current understanding. I have prepared these thoughts with a view to being clear, consistent and compassionate. I have shared them already with various groups and gatherings, including colleagues in the Bishop's staff, the LGBTQI+ chaplains, and attendees at a Diocesan Evangelical Fellowship (DEF) event at which I was invited to speak.

I am delighted to have been called to lead such a vibrant and diverse diocese; one in which church congregations are made up of individuals from many backgrounds, in the grace of God seeking to follow Jesus faithfully in a complex and challenging world.

As we follow Jesus together, love each other, and play our part in witnessing to the good news of the coming Kingdom, each of us has a unique and precious gift to bring.

The gift of LGBTQI+ Christians in Church of England Birmingham is welcome and valued. Everyone must experience the church as safe and welcoming; a place where, travelling together as God's people, we can work out what it means to be 'in Christ' (Romans 8:1), and to witness to the 'fullness of life' that Jesus promises to all who follow him (John 10:10). There is no place for homophobia in the church. Homophobia is rooted in fear. As people who are in Christ, we are not controlled by fear but, rather, are being transformed by love (1 John 4: 18).

In the church, while recognising and affirming the inherent value and dignity of every individual and seeking to obey Jesus' command to love each other (John 15:12), we also acknowledge that we hold different views on complex and personal aspects of life. For some Christians, differences of understanding and conviction about marriage and the place of sexual intimacy are marked. Where some see a case in scripture for revision of the received

teaching of the church, others do not. Where some long to see further change, for others, there has already been too much. Because these differences of conviction are closely bound up with our identities, they have the potential to cause suspicion, frustration, and anger. If not properly acknowledged and carefully addressed, our disagreements can lead to disunity in Christ's body and, far worse, even fracture. We are called to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit (Eph 4:4) and to focus our prayers and efforts on building up the body, doing all we can to contribute to its flourishing. Our differences on marriage, sexual intimacy and many other important matters will continue. Considering these differences and disagreements, the way we choose to live together as co-heirs with Christ (Romans 8:17) and to obey Christ's command to 'love each other as I have loved you' (John 15: 12) is the heart of the matter for us.

As the Bishop of Birmingham, I am committed to being part of a diverse church that strives to love and welcome LGBTQI+ people. I also hold a personal commitment to the Church of England's received teaching on marriage. This teaching is set out in Canon B 30 'Of Holy Matrimony' and is helpfully summarised on page 1 of the LLF Pastoral Guidance. Here we read, *'The Church of England teaches that Holy Matrimony is a lifelong covenant between one man and one woman, blessed by God in creation and pointing to the love between Christ and the Church; a way of life which Christ makes holy. It is within marriage that sexual intimacy finds its proper place.'*

At my ordination as a bishop, I was required to make a series of declarations. One of these was to express my commitment to faithfully communicating the received teaching of the Church of England. This included the church's current understanding of marriage and the place of sexual intimacy.

I am committed to upholding my ordination vows and to joyfully sharing the teaching of the Church of England as it has been handed to us by those who came before. I am equally committed to serving all my siblings in Christ with love and compassion, and to building up the whole body of the church in all its wonderful diversity.

In November 2023 the House of Bishops voted to commend the Prayers of Love and Faith (PLF) resources for use in regular public worship. Draft guidance has been published alongside the prayers. Since I hold a traditional understanding of marriage and the place of sexual intimacy, I do not feel able personally to use the Prayers. However, I recognise that I have valued colleagues and co-workers in the gospel who are keen to use them in the course of the pastoral ministry and witness offered within their own parish contexts. I am committed to supporting all clergy and lay workers within the diocese whether they choose to use the prayers or not.

The path we are called to walk together into God's hopeful future has been challenging and will continue to be so. But by God's grace, as we strive to love and serve each other as those who are 'in Christ', it is our love for one another and our unity that will witness most powerfully to the fact that we gather around the risen Jesus. In a deeply divided and anxious world, a message of hope, evidenced by the love and unity of those Christians who witness to it, will be attractive and compelling. This, more than anything else, will contribute to growing churches at the heart of each community and bring glory to God.

I encourage all Christians in Church of England Birmingham to pray that God will give us grace, wisdom and compassion in abundance and make us, together, a powerful witness to Jesus in the challenging and unsettling times in which we live.

I have covered a lot of ground. Before moving onto the next item, I invite us to hold a silent pause to allow for brief reflection.

With gratitude for your ongoing friendship and prayers as we seek to serve the city and region in the name of Christ.

Rt Rev Dr Michael Volland
29 June 2024