

Bishop Jonathan's Presidential Address: Rochester Diocesan Synod Responding to Living in Love and Faith

It is perfectly understandable that many of us would like to be able to focus our attention today on the task of growing the Church, and also addressing the many pressing challenges facing our world – and we will be doing that during much of today's Synod, but the reality is that we cannot avoid the issues arising from Living in Love and Faith, following the debate at General Synod last month.

This is a complex and contentious topic and all I can do today is to sketch out some of my thinking on where we have got to, and then, after the General Synod report, to allow some time to respond to questions. By way of background, I sent Synod members earlier this week a link to what I believe is a very helpful summary of the current state of play, contained in a blog piece by Christopher Cocksworth, the Bishop of Coventry who was much involved in leading the LLF process in its early stages: <https://covenant.livingchurch.org/2023/02/21/living-in-love-and-faith-where-do-things-stand-where-do-we-go-from-here/>

I also attached a copy of a paper on the Church of England's doctrine of marriage, to which I and a number of other bishops contributed recently. I hope many of you have had time to read these two documents. I hope too that we will remember today that these issues are about some of the deepest and most personal aspects of people's lives, and centre on some of our deepest convictions. It behoves us to speak carefully, compassionately and with graciousness and respect towards one another.

Let me wind back a little. The LLF process has been underway for almost six years. I have been committed to the process throughout. It has involved large numbers of people, with different life experiences and from a wide range of church traditions, seeking to understand one another's perspectives and to explore these more deeply both theologically and in other ways. This first phase was followed by a process of discernment by the College of Bishops, leading to a set of draft proposals from the House of Bishops being presented to and debated at General Synod last month.

As we all know, this carefully planned process was rather rudely derailed by the disgraceful leaking to the BBC of the draft proposals before they could be properly presented, leading to a further loss of trust and a rather unseemly media melee, with everyone trying to make their voice heard above the throng. At the same time, various pronouncements were made by some bishops and others which put a particular spin on the proposals and sometimes suggested that they were anyway only a staging post towards further and more radical change.

As a result of this, and in line with what I have said previously and publicly about my own convictions, I worked with a group of my fellow bishops to publish a short paper affirming our belief in the Church of England's traditional doctrine of marriage as a life-long union between a man and a woman.

The paper ended by making it clear that at the same time we recognise that there are good things, such as companionship, affection and mutual love and support, in other forms of relationships, including between people of the same sex, and that we support finding ways of affirming and celebrating these.

Without breaking confidences, I can also let you know that this group has been in contact with the Archbishops and the leaders of LLF to express our concerns about the way in which the process unfolded both prior to and during the General Synod, with potentially serious consequences for the mission and unity of the Church of England and for the Anglican Communion. At the same time, we have also made it clear that we are committed to seeing through the LLF process over the coming months, recognising that there is much work still to be done and that final conclusions on key matters have not yet been reached.

Turning to the debate at General Synod, I would urge everyone to read very carefully the terms of the motion, including the one amendment that was accepted by Synod towards the end of a very long debate.

The full motion, as amended, was as follows:

That this Synod, recognising the commitment to learning and deep listening to God and to each other of the Living in Love and Faith process, and desiring with God's help to journey together while acknowledging the different deeply held convictions within the Church:

- (a) lament and repent of the failure of the Church to be welcoming to LGBTQI+ people and the harm that LGBTQI+ people have experienced and continue to experience in the life of the Church;
- (b) recommit to our shared witness to God's love for and acceptance of every person by continuing to embed the Pastoral Principles in our life together locally and nationally;
- (c) commend the continued learning together enabled by the Living in Love and Faith process and resources in relation to identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage;
- (d) welcome the decision of the House of Bishops to replace Issues in Human Sexuality with new pastoral guidance;
- (e) welcome the response from the College of Bishops and look forward to the House of Bishops further refining, commending and issuing the Prayers of Love and Faith described in GS 2289 and its Annexes;
- (f) invite the House of Bishops to monitor the Church's use of and response to the Prayers of Love and Faith, once they have been commended and published, and to report back to Synod in five years' time;
- (g) endorse the decision of the College and House of Bishops not to propose any change to the doctrine of marriage, and their intention that the final version of the

Prayers of Love and Faith should not be contrary to or indicative of a departure from the doctrine of the Church of England.'

The Votes on the motion were as follows:

Bishops 36 for, 4 against, 2 abstained
Clergy 111 for, 85 against, 3 abstained
Laity 103 for, 92 against, 5 abstained

You will see from this that the votes in the Houses of Clergy and Laity were fairly close – as they had been with many of the other amendments, all of which were lost. As you may know, I spoke in favour of the amendment which became clause (g), firstly on the grounds that its being passed would be an acknowledgement of, and hopefully some reassurance to, the significant minority who had voted for many of the other unsuccessful amendments; and secondly because the amendment affirmed and strengthened what the House of Bishops had previously said, namely that there was to be no change in the Church of England's doctrine of marriage.

What has become clear is that the proposals as they stand leave the Church of England deeply divided. I do believe that part of the problem is the way in which things have played out and been portrayed outside of the formal process, but the reality is that the proposals as they stand do not command sufficient widespread support to enable the Church to move forward together. The voting figures at General Synod make this very clear, as do many of the comments I have received since the Synod debate.

Given that fact, you may well ask why in the end I was prepared to vote for the amended motion – and indeed why the majority of those bishops who contributed to our paper on the Doctrine of Marriage also did so. And my answer lies in the terms of the motion, which recognises that there is still more work to be done on matters such as the content of the prayers of love and faith, the pastoral guidance that will accompany them, and the pastoral and legal provision that will need to be made for those who choose either to use or not to use the prayers in their ministry.

Put simply, the amendment gave me grounds to believe that, despite the way things had been variously spun and portrayed, the process was still open to meaningful change that would honour the Bishops' commitment to upholding the Church's traditional doctrine of marriage, while also making pastoral provision for people in same-sex relationships that would affirm and celebrate gifts such as companionship, affection and mutual love and support.

Synod, I am deeply conscious of the responsibility of my role as Diocesan Bishop, both to uphold the historic teaching of the Church and to be chief pastor to all the people of this Diocese, whatever their sexuality or the views on matters of sexuality. What I will be committing myself to do over the coming months is to work with my fellow bishops, as I have consistently done, to ensure that the historic teaching of the Church of England, about marriage as a lifelong union between a man and a woman and as the intended context for sexual relations, is upheld. I will only be able to support the final version of the proposals if this is the case. At the same time, again as I have consistently done, I will be arguing

for appropriate pastoral provision to affirm and support people who enter into committed same-sex relationships, and to celebrate the good in those relationships, in ways that do not indicate a departure from the Church's traditional understanding of marriage but which do allow for the exercise of conscientious judgement on the part of individuals about the ordering of their lives, as was recognised in the 1991 document "Issues in the Human Sexuality" (Section 5.6).

There is a great deal more to be said and done about the content of the prayers as yet to be commended by the House of Bishops, as well as about legal issues regarding the status of the prayers and the position of clergy who choose either to use or not to use any such prayers. These are all serious issues that are far from resolved. Depending on how these questions are answered, consideration will also need to be given as to how we accommodate differences of conviction and practice within the Church of England. Whatever happens, however, I will remain committed to my twin responsibilities to uphold the historic faith of the Church of England (as promised at my ordination as a bishop) and to be the chief pastor to all the people of this diocese.

In the meantime, and recognising how difficult and uncertain things are at present, I would urge everyone to hold their nerve, to hold together and to remain committed to seeing through the LLF process in the coming months. There is still much to be said and done, and there are still many questions to be answered. I would strongly encourage those who are deeply concerned about these issues (from whatever perspective) to remain fully engaged with the process and with the life of the Diocese, in order to ensure that their voices are fully heard while we work to find a way forward that holds us together as far as possible.

In this regard, it would also assist me if clergy, lay people and PCCs would write to me outlining their concerns, to enable me to communicate these to the Archbishops, the House of Bishops and to those who are involved in shaping the way forward – though please understand that I will not be able to reply personally to everyone!

In closing, I want to make it clear that I am deeply torn by these issues. I recognise that what I have said today may well be a huge disappointment (or worse) for many of our sisters and brothers in the LGBTQIA+ communities and their supporters, and I am deeply sorry for the pain this will cause. My profoundest instinct as a pastor is to seek for a way forward that could be embraced by all. However, the divided nature of the votes at General Synod, together with the reactions of people with very diverse convictions about these issues, have led me to believe that this is simply not possible. There are fundamentally different conceptions amongst us of what God requires of his people in terms of how we live out our relationships and our sexuality. In the end, each of us has to make a choice about our own understanding of these hugely important and deeply personal issues.

As Bishop of the Diocese of Rochester, I am having to make a choice on where I stand, painful though that is. My fellow bishops up and down the country will each make their choices – and one thing is certain: that we will not all agree. And then we as God’s people will have to work out how we will relate to one another, care for one another and love each other as followers of Jesus Christ and children of our heavenly Father.

Thank you for your support and for your prayers.

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