

Presidential Address, Telford Minster, 18.03.23

I want to say one or two things about the bishops' response to *Living in Love and Faith*, as it has been debated at General Synod and as it has been received following that Synod debate. There is a great deal that could be said about this – indeed there is a great deal that has been said about it – but I want to focus on four particular points: firstly, what has been agreed and what has not been agreed; secondly, my own position on this issue; thirdly, how this has been received within the diocese; and fourthly, support for people in what are unsettled times.

In the first place, what General Synod voted to receive and to approve was the response from the House of Bishops, and indeed from the College of Bishops, to the *Living in Love and Faith* process. This response from the bishops included various strands, but probably the most prominent was the proposal to commend for use a set of *Prayers of Love and Faith*. The *Prayers of Love and Faith* are not a service as such, but a collection of prayer and scriptural resources which it is intended that ministers will be able to use, or not use, at their sole discretion, to pray with and for couples who wish to mark and celebrate their love for one another in the presence of God. They could be used in many different settings: as individual prayers in a home or a private setting; at an already scheduled church service; or put together in different ways to form a service of dedication or blessing. They are not, and are not intended to be or to resemble, a marriage service. Nor are they a service for the blessing of a marriage. They are prayers for people, and some of them are prayers seeking God's blessing on people. The prayers are worded in ways that make clear that they do not depart from the Church of England's understanding, expressed in the canons, of marriage as a union of one man with one woman. Another thing to emphasise about these prayers is that they are used solely at the discretion of the minister, whether ordained or lay. That means that there would be no compulsion on any minister to use them, no expectation that all ministers would use any or all of the prayers.

General Synod approved in principle a first draft of the prayers to be commended in due course by the bishops. Before that happens, however, there will be a further process of refining of the prayers in light of comments received from Synod members and others. Also, and importantly, the pastoral guidance will be drawn up to accompany the prayers and to inform other parts of the bishops' response to *Living in Love and Faith*. Those items have not yet been agreed; the plan is that they will come back to a future meeting of General Synod. Until the prayers are commended by the bishops, they should not be used in this diocese.

I hope that gives some sense of what has been agreed and what is yet to be agreed by General Synod. I also think I owe it to this Diocesan Synod to let you know where I stand on these issues, both personally and as your bishop. Throughout my time in Lichfield I have made clear that I want to see us warmly welcoming and including LGBT+ people in our congregations and in our common life. For myself, I am glad of the opportunity that the *Prayers of Love and Faith* give to ministers who so wish to express that welcome through praying for God's blessing on people. We are all in need of God's blessing in our lives, and I can think of no better way to express a welcome for somebody than to pray that God will bless them. I have also made it clear throughout my time in Lichfield that I accept and uphold the Church of England's teaching (as expressed in Canon B30) that holy matrimony is a lifelong union between one man and one woman, and I am not looking for a change in that teaching. Given those two principles, you will understand that I personally am supportive of the General Synod's decision, which in the amended form of the final

motion as passed explicitly endorsed the decision of the bishops not to propose any change to the doctrine of marriage.

As your diocesan bishop, I also have a particular care for the ordained and lay ministers of our diocese, and I recognise that the Synod's decision (if finalised at a future meeting) will both present new pastoral opportunities for them and may also present them with difficult challenges. I and my brother and sister bishops have great respect for our clergy and lay ministers, and we are committed to honouring the conscientious decisions that they make and to upholding them in their ministries. We trust the pastoral, ethical and theological discernment of our ministers; I cannot say often enough that there will be no pressure from us on ministers either to use or to refrain from using any of the *Prayers of Love and Faith*, and we will do our best to support our clergy and lay ministers in any pressures they may find themselves facing.

As to how the General Synod's decision has been received in this diocese: I recognise that for many, both lay and clergy, this has been, and continues to be, difficult. With my episcopal colleagues, I have spent a great deal of time over the past weeks meeting individuals and groups, and in correspondence and conversation with those who have been dismayed or disappointed by the vote. I particularly appreciated the opportunity recently to meet with members of the Diocesan Evangelical Fellowship, who shared some of the issues which are most pressing for them. We have heard of pain, confusion, sometimes anger, and an uncomfortable sense of distraction from the core tasks of ministry and mission. I really have heard that. At the same time, I have also heard from plenty of others who have been gently encouraged by the Synod's decision, as well as some who have felt underwhelmed by it as they do not see it as sufficiently radical. And of course there are very many from whom I have not heard, because they do not see this as a matter of particular importance, for themselves or for their churches. So it is a very mixed picture; and I think that much of that mixture in the picture in fact represents disagreements which were already present among us, which the Synod vote has catalysed rather than created by itself. We are at an unsettled time in the life of the Church of England; it is my hope and prayer that we continue to treat one another with the respect, kindness and patience that befits brothers and sisters in Christ, and that we have a particular concern for those who are as individuals most affected by these issues.

It is with that concern in mind that I have been working with colleagues across a range of views and experiences to put in place a pilot scheme for chaplaincy support providing a confidential safe space for listening, encouragement, spiritual and pastoral care, and signposting to other opportunities for support. This support will be made available for anyone in the diocese, both within the LGBT+ community and outside of it, who hold different convictions on this issue. We should be in a position to make a more detailed announcement about this next week; chaplains available will include both those from an 'affirming perspective' and those from an 'orthodox perspective' (I recognise the limitations of the language we try to find to describe our different views on this, but I think you will understand what I am saying by these words).

Please do pray for this pilot provision as it gets underway, and let us above all keep praying for one another as we all seek to find the mind of Christ and to follow in his way. I have myself been deeply touched by the very many people who have assured me of their prayers for me, and that has been something on which I have relied and continue to rely. Thank you.

+Michael Lich:

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