

I fear that by the end of this Group of Sessions, Synod may feel that it has heard rather too much from me. And, depending on how these proposals are received, you may have to exercise more graciousness in hearing from me again on subsequent occasions.

On Wednesday I shall have opportunity to speak more specifically to the motions that are in my name relating to GS 1924 - the Steering Committee's report - and GS 1925 and 1926 - the draft Measure and draft Amending Canon. This evening's presentation is intended to be rather more introductory, hopefully enabling us to use fruitfully the time set aside tomorrow for discussion in groups. Each group includes at least one member of the House of Bishops, and also either a member of the Steering Committee or a person who has been party to the Committee's discussions. The intention is that our time in groups will give us the opportunity fully to understand the shape and content of the proposals that are now brought to Synod; this will hopefully inform the debates that we will have on Wednesday. My plan for the next few minutes is to tell you something of the process followed by the Steering Committee, and to make some comments about the overall shape of the package of legislative and other instruments which we are bringing to you.

In July Synod gave instructions for a Steering Committee to be formed in order to prepare legislation on the basis of what was described as 'Option 1' in the report of the previous Working Party. It further instructed that the proposals include a mandatory grievance procedure (as it was then described), and requested the House of Bishops to prepare a draft Declaration or Act of Synod. It also urged that facilitated conversations continue to be part of the process, and it heard (though did not vote on) a suggestion that the Steering Committee have more members than usual and include a wider range of viewpoints on the substantive issue. Subsequently the House of Bishops Standing Committee requested the Steering Committee to work also on those elements of a possible package which are the responsibility of the House - notably the proposed Declaration by the House.

And thus it has been. The Committee has included 5 members who did not vote for the previously proposed legislative package, and some had not voted for 'Option 1' in July; for some, therefore, the starting point of 'Option 1' was always going to be problematic. The process has been fascinating, tough, and at times inspirational. We have been clear that our task has been to do the thing that has not hitherto proved possible. That is, to remove the bar to the ordination of women to the episcopate in such a way that it is clear that the Church of England is fully and unequivocally committed to all orders of ministry being open equally to all, without reference to gender - no ifs and buts. And at the same time, not least because the Church of England continues to be part of a Communion and a wider world church in which other viewpoints continue to be held, we commit ourselves to being a church in which those who, on grounds of theological conviction, are unable to receive that ministry may continue to flourish within our life and structures. An impossible task, many of us may have thought.

We have met over 5 full days; discussion has been lengthy and very detailed. We have discussed and debated together - hard. This has not been about seeking to change one another's theological convictions, but about understanding those convictions and working together towards a way forward for the whole church. We have thus moved away from the language of making 'provision' for particular viewpoints - rather we have sought to make provision for all of us together. We have met together, we have eaten together, we have....; perhaps most importantly we have prayed together. Detaching myself slightly as Chair of the Committee, I have observed that people have treated each other as fellow Christians, rather than as opponents - even quite liked each other. And I want to thank the members of the Steering Committee for their graciousness, their commitment to the task, and their sheer hard work. With them, I would also thank our three facilitators, the Dean of York who acted as a consultant, the Secretary General, and the legal officers - they have worked with us all the way through and have been tireless in their efforts to support us.

As you will know from the final paragraphs of GS 1924, this package does not come to you with the unanimous commendation of every member of the Committee; given where we started, I would have been extremely surprised if it had. But it does come with thirteen of the members supporting and the other two abstaining - that in itself is remarkable. It is worth noting that there have also been some generous, if sometimes cautious, responses to the proposals from a wide range of people beyond this Synod.

And so to the overall shape of this package of legislative and other instruments. The Committee was given a clear steer that the legislation should be simple, and that other material and processes should be in non-legislative forms. The draft Measure (GS 1925) has 4 clauses and a Schedule: it repeals the 1993 Measure and it permits Synod to make canonical provision for the ordination of women as bishops as well as priests. It makes a clarificatory addition to a Schedule of the Equality Act. The draft Amending Canon (GS 1926) has 6 paragraphs: it amends or revokes a number of Canons, removing from the Canons all language of gender in relation to Orders; it adds a new Canon (C29) requiring the House of Bishops to put in place a procedure for the resolution of disputes (the grievance procedure requested by Synod), with any subsequent change to those arrangements requiring the consent of 2/3 of each Synodical House.

Alongside these two pieces of draft legislation, you have suggested texts for the Regulation establishing that dispute resolution process (Annex B of GS 1924) and for a Declaration to be made by the House of Bishops (Annex A of GS 1924). It is important to underline that at this stage these documents in GS 1924 are simply the Committee's suggestions to the House - the House will consider them in detail in December, with the intention of bringing them

back to Synod for substantive discussion and vote in February. It is these documents which will give shape to the pastoral practice that will be adopted in relation to parochial and ministerial matters. They seek to give practical and pastoral effect to the 5 guiding principles (as we are now seeking to call them) within a setting of simplicity, mutuality and reciprocity. As well as the dispute resolution process, they address a number of matters including the provision of bishops who will and will not ordain women, the arrangements for parishes wishing to seek the priestly or episcopal ministry of men, the need for consultation between bishops and such parishes, the choice of bishops to exercise ministry in such parishes. There is also material about the bishop's role in securing and protecting the rights of parish representatives in relation to parochial appointments, and there are some clarificatory paragraphs about the Oath of Canonical Obedience. As with the regulations for dispute resolution, it is suggested that the House bind itself to requiring a 2/3 majority in each Synodical House for any subsequent amendments to the Declaration. Though these additional documents are at the moment suggested texts which the House has yet to discuss and to which Synod will return, we have included them now both in the interests of transparency of process and also because we think it important that Synod see at each stage as much as possible of what the whole package may look like.

The Steering Committee knows that its work is not perfect. We know, for example, that the wording of Paragraph 19 of the House's Declaration can be made clearer; we know also that we need to provide a process for the transition from the 1993 arrangements (including the Act of Synod, which will be rescinded) to the new ones. There will no doubt be other helpful changes and clarifications which will come to light as the process (hopefully) moves forward. But, without wishing to appear too controlling, the Steering Committee is very clear in its advice to this Synod and to the House of Bishops that this package of instruments has to be seen as a whole and that substantive change to any one of the elements, unless agreed across the spectrum of views, risks upsetting the careful balance that we believe we have achieved. Put more bluntly, if such substantive change were to be made, the extent of agreement reached across the Committee is likely to fall away. There is a careful balance here and it is dependent upon all the elements before you. And we do not have a Plan B. I am conscious that that sounds as if we are presenting you with a *fait accompli* - it is not quite that because we are sure that aspects can, by agreement, be improved; but as things stand we do readily see a different sort of package that that has potential achieve the same wide-ranging degree of acceptance.

What we have here is, most of us on the Committee believe, a set of proposals which might just enable us not only to move forward in unity but also to celebrate that unity. All on the Committee have, I think, had to give at various points; everybody will have paragraphs or clauses which are difficult for them. We dare to think that these proposals may lead not only to individuals or congregations flourishing, but to the flourishing of the whole church in our shared mission for and to our nation and society. We ask you tomorrow to engage with this material, to question it, to seek to understand it, to see something of how it has come into being and how it hangs together. And on Wednesday will ask you to express your mind through the motions which will be before us. And I now encourage you to remain here for Evening Worship, holding these and other matters in our prayers.

Source URL: <https://www.churchofengland.org/news-and-media/news-and-statements/women-episcopate-bishop-rochester-james-langstaff>