



Geoff Crawford / Church of England

As Lead Bishop for the Living in Love and Faith process, I recently invited members of the three LLF Working Groups to come together in Leicester for a weekend. This gathering saw a remarkable coming together of General Synod members who are on the opposite ends of the spectrum when it comes to views on relationships, human sexuality, and marriage.

In the early summer warmth, on the weekend of Eurovision (watched by some while others studiously avoided it), we went deeper into our differences about doctrine and ethics, and then found ourselves uniting in a shared desire to remain part of the Church of England. The significance of this articulation of a desire for unity should not be underestimated. It has allowed for a new spirit of generosity and pragmatism – how are we going to remain united while also being honest about our differences?

In my own reflections, I've found myself returning again and again to Philippians 2 – a chapter which is all about unity. Firstly, the unity of the Trinity – Athanasius used this passage to skewer Arius' followers for denying there was a time when the Son was not -it clearly teaches Christ's pre-existence as God. Secondly, the unity of the Person of Christ – Cyril of Alexandria argued persuasively against Nestorius who tried to make the case for the distinctiveness (even opposition) of the divine and human natures. And then the unity of the children of God who follow the example of Christ's humility.

In this context, "being in full accord and of one mind" (NRSV – Philippians 2:2) does not imply sameness or agreement. Rather it speaks of the mind of Christ – the One who "emptied himself" – and so displaying the humility which regards "others as better than yourself". Similarly, being "blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation" (2:15) speaks not just of moral purity, but rather the quality of our relationships in the one family. "Do all things without murmuring and arguing" (2:14) is Paul's exhortation, so that you can "shine like stars in the world" (2:15).

So, unity and our common life in the Body of Christ matter because they speak of the unity of the Trinity, the unity of Christ and the reconciliation which Christ alone can mediate. So what we saw on the weekend in Leicester is confirmation that all parts of the Church rightly take unity seriously.

The proposals that have emerged are still being considered by the House of Bishops before they are brought to General Synod in July. In broad outline, the hope is that ongoing conversations could lead to the creation of space within the church where we might hold our differences yet maintain our unity. A space for those who are absolutely committed to the present doctrine of marriage; a space for those who want to see some development of current arrangements; and a large space for those who are undecided, or confused by the whole debate, and see no need to make such a choice at this time. Three spaces in one Church.

Of course, there are some who want the boundaries between these spaces to be firm and well defined – to speak of clarity of doctrine. Others

want porous boundaries and flexibility – to speak of discernment of how God is leading. However, it is my hope that both approaches can be combined with humility and with depth of communion – with relationships which witness to the presence and work of God in all parts of the Church. There is still much to work through. Yet, our shared experience at the LLF weekend in Leicester confirmed that this possible.

And I am determined that whatever the final details of this approach, it will not just allow freedom for each group to feel that they are not being coerced into believing or doing something against their conscience but will also allow for genuine expressions of our unity in the Body of Christ, and in our shared Anglican heritage. We have a tradition which “embodies continuities of conflict” (Alistair McIntyre, *After Virtue*). And history teaches us that, over time, consensus usually emerges, even though it may take time.

This is not about ‘unity at any price’ – Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria show how important it is to contend for right doctrine. But it is a call to be careful and to respect and value the processes of the Church for collective discernment. Unity matters – it really matters – more so than we often acknowledge.

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