

# FRIENDSHIP & THE BODY OF CHRIST

**A Living in Love & Faith  
resource for reflection  
and conversation**

Foreword by the Archbishops  
of Canterbury and York

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A Living in Love & Faith resource  
for reflection and conversation

FAITH & ORDER  
COMMISSION



LIVING  
IN LOVE  
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# Foreword



**'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'**

**John 13.34-35**

The command to love one another is probably the most famous saying of Jesus. It is, also, probably the most difficult to put into practice. Yet Jesus commands his disciples to love one another as a sign of God's presence among them for those outside the church.

We have to confess that we have not been very good in Christian churches at loving one another, whether within the Church of England, or between different churches. We often fight and argue, sometimes publicly. Yet disagreement and argument are not always a sign of the absence of love – but signs of love-in-progress, signs that we are trying to learn to love one another, and it is hard.

This latest short study in the *Living in Love and Faith* series explores the legacy of Jesus' last speech to his disciples, calling them 'friends' and commanding them to love one another, and to 'become completely one'. It asks, what does it mean to be church, and to be friends of Jesus? This isn't a comprehensive treatise on the doctrine of the church; rather it is a reflection on friendship and the church, and an invitation to explore the nature of our relationship with one another, and how this may shape the next phase of the *Living in Love and Faith* process, as we move towards making decisions.

The church, just like the world around us, has been through enormous changes over the last few decades. *Friendship and the Body of Christ* explores how these changes might have shaped the way in which we understand our shared identity in Christ and form relationships with one another.

We commend it to you for study, reflection and, mostly, for hopeful conversations.

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CHAPTER 1

# Taking Stock



The church is a living body – the body of Christ, given to God’s people: given to the disciples at the last supper; given every time we, disciples of Jesus, share the bread and wine of the eucharist; given to us, broken on the cross every time we ask for forgiveness and receive absolution; given to us mysteriously in the reality of Jesus’ resurrection body and in the mystery of the ‘now and not yet’ of our life together; and given to us by the power of the Holy Spirit poured down at Pentecost, sweeping into one a people from every tongue and nation to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

We are called to receive and inhabit this gift of the church: this body, of which Christ is the head.

The giftedness of our humanity was the starting point of the *Living in Love and Faith* Book. In it, we were invited to reflect on the gift of life, the gift of life in relationship, the gift of marriage and the gift of learning. Just as we do not create life or the love which draws us into relationship, so we do not create the church.

Rather we are called to receive and inhabit this gift of the church: this body, of which Christ is the head. As members of this one body we are interdependent and indispensable, commanded to love one another with the love of the gift-giver himself, Jesus Christ.

The Church of England, as a particular manifestation of this gift of the church, is a testimony to the faithfulness of the gift-giver. As the nation and the Church of England have weathered storms of change over the centuries, we can see God’s faithfulness at work in the Church – growing and developing in order to stay true to the head who is ‘the same yesterday and today and for ever’ (Hebrews 13.8).

Following the pattern of Christ, the abundant life to which the church of God testifies is also the way of the cross as somehow, mysteriously, the church accepts its part in sharing in the

sufferings of Christ on behalf of the people it serves. Following the pattern of Christ, the Church of England sees itself as being in the service of all people with its local churches dispersed, like leaven, in every corner of the nation. It also seeks to play its part as a member of the much wider embodiment of the church – the Anglican Communion and the universal, catholic church.

So when confronted with the discomfort, pain, fear and frustration of disagreement and indecision how does the church proceed? How does the church go about discerning together that voice which says, 'This is the way; walk in it' (Isaiah 30.21)? What does it mean to be obedient to the one head, Jesus Christ, to whom we owe our common life and for whose glory we exist?

What does it mean to be obedient to the one head, Jesus Christ, to whom we owe our common life and for whose glory we exist?

In these pages we will explore a little further the implications first, of understanding our relationships as those of a *community of friends of Jesus* – drawing on a scriptural image less familiar than some – and second, of understanding our being church as a gift – the gift of the body of Christ. We will probe what these might mean for how we understand and live out our life together when we disagree.

The disagreements which prompted these reflections relate to questions of human identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. But there are other differences and disagreements among us. In fact, how we approach one set of issues may affect how we see another. The trouble is that we cannot put questions about other disagreements or developments on pause while we work one set of disagreements out. Our discernment about human identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage is in a context of wrestling with so many changes in the life of the church, as well as in the world around us.

So we begin here in Chapter 1 by looking around at some of these changes, taking stock of the wider context in which we are pondering what it means to discern 'the way' for the Church of England, and to 'walk in it'. We also set our reflections within the range of images and metaphors we find in Scripture and tradition for the church. In Chapter 2 we will explore this universal relationship of friendship: its different guises in different contexts, times and cultures – and how these relate to how we understand our relationships within the church today. Chapters 3 and 4 adopt a more theological tone as we dive into the Gospel of John to ponder the gift of friendship that Jesus offers to his followers, exploring what that might mean for our life together as a Church, called to live in love and faith. Chapter 5 asks questions about what this means for us now as we wrestle with the challenges of a changing world, the discomfort of disagreement and discord, and the call to be one in Christ.

### Discernment in a time of change

**"It feels like everything in the Church is changing at once."**

This was someone's remark about the Church of England in a meeting about engaging with *Living in Love and Faith*. A moment's reflection seems to bear this out.

There is COVID-19 for starters. When the pandemic took hold, worshippers were segregated from one another as they moved out of their familiar church buildings into their homes and on to screens. Now, over two years later, church communities waver between the two, and churchgoers and leaders find themselves asking new questions about what it means to be a worshipping community.

Parishes faced with declining numbers and fewer resources find themselves having to consider what the implications of these realities might be at a local level. Some are eager to take up the

challenge of planting new worshipping communities in different contexts, thinking outside the box and embracing the potential of lay leadership. Some fear losing their communities and time-honoured ways of being church – especially when mobility and online access are limited. Tensions arise between those who are wanting to embrace new forms of church life and those who wonder what it means to be a parish-based Church that serves the nation. Continuing friction relating to the theological and practical settlement over the ordination of women shows that the Church hasn't yet fully learned to live in a reconciled way: the journey – and pain – of living with disagreement goes on. Under these pressing realities, how does the Church find time to reflect on questions of faithfulness to the wisdom of inherited ways, of faithful responses to different contexts in society, and of the missional opportunities they bring, discerning rightly between them?

Change is sweeping across dioceses, too. The need to balance budgets raises the necessity or possibility of deep-seated change, perhaps prompting greater cooperation between dioceses and across the Church as a whole. The situation raises questions about how to balance the priorities of pastoral care and teaching with the need for good stewardship through governance and administration. Tensions easily arise between those who see themselves at the coalface and those whose ministry is exercised across the diocese as a whole. Bishops themselves are reflecting on their episcopal life and leadership within their own dioceses and as a College and House of Bishops.

At a national level, a quick scan across recent and ongoing Church initiatives and programmes gives weight to this perception of all-encompassing change: *Setting God's People Free, Everyday Discipleship, Vision and Strategy, Episcopal Change, Transforming Effectiveness*. Within these programmes there are exhortations to be part of a changing culture with its inevitable outworking in structural change which is affecting many people one way or another.

And overshadowing the national and the local, the long and gruelling investigations into the Church's failures to safeguard the very people in her care have coloured much of church life – inevitably and rightly so. Effecting real change at every level of the Church for the better safeguarding of all is non-negotiable.

Reading all of this, it would be possible to imagine that the church greets change with fear and anxiety. However, the church of God has always been in dynamic and creative relationship with societal and cultural change. For example, it is with joy that the Church of England has discerned ever richer understandings of the ministry available to women. The Spirit of God, who blows where the Spirit will, signals the transforming power and promise of God. The Spirit invites God's people to dwell deeper in the coming kingdom of God, and invites us into the new work which God is undertaking in Jesus Christ. Seen in this light, change reminds us to set our hope on Christ, so that we might live for his praise and glory (Ephesians 1.12).

*Living in Love and Faith* has sought to offer a hopeful approach to change: a change in how the Church of England might go about listening, learning and discerning together – and how episcopal leadership and synodical decision-making might fit into such a process.

This summer – after this resource has gone into print – the Church of England will have welcomed and hosted its sister churches of the Anglican Communion at the Lambeth Conference. Change will have been afoot here, too, as bishops will have arrived having already spent time together online, getting to know each other by studying, reflecting and praying together about what it means to be God's church for God's world. Here, within this global gathering, as within the Church of England itself, bishops will have pondered and inhabited the tension between Jesus' prayer that we are one and his call to live in the truth by obeying God's commands, bringing with them their different understandings of the call to live holy lives. During the two weeks of intensive Bible

study and discussions about key themes, friendships will have been forged, perhaps giving disagreements a different hue.

The Church is buffeted by external winds of change too. Whether it's about responding to climate change, the war in Ukraine, the government's outsourcing of asylum applications, the housing shortage, or a ban on conversion therapy, the Church finds itself active in the public square of debate and policy as well as in local foodbanks, schools and community centres offering practical care and support.

Within this seeming maelstrom of change there is a deep longing. A longing about what the church could and should and might be in the life of the nation.

Within this seeming maelstrom of change there is a deep longing. A longing about what the Church of England could and should and might be in the life of the nation. Our national strategies are peppered with words that strive to articulate this longing: simple, humble, bold, coherent, effective, young, diverse, collaborative, inclusive, relational, human, hopeful.

But sometimes the longings diverge. Uncomfortable silences, avoidance

tactics, difficult conversations, even confrontations belie profound, visceral differences. The consecration of bishops, the sharing of the eucharistic elements, and questions raised by *Living in Love and Faith* touch deep places in our understanding and experience of humanity and of God. Disagreement makes change even more uncomfortable.

## Discernment and disagreement

It is easier to weather storms of change together. The trouble is that the multiplicity of challenges and changes before us give rise

to multiple convictions about how to respond to them. The Church is not fully 'together' – but neither is the Church a collection of diverse individuals with different views and experiences, each free to go their own way. As members of the body – of which Christ is the head – it is Christ who holds us together.

What if one view of inclusion excludes others? What if our ideas of 'holy' are different from each other?

That means that we find ourselves wrestling with very real and practical questions about our life together. What if one person's convictions are experienced as deeply harmful by another? What if some believe the way others choose to live is disobedient to Jesus' commands, harmful to the life of the individual and of the church? What if one view

of inclusion excludes others? What if our ideas of 'holy' are different from each other? What if 'belonging' means different things to different church communities? What happens when our convictions about doctrine are incompatible with our intuitions about pastoral practice? Does choosing to dissociate ourselves from each other deny the reality of Christ's presence in the other? How does the manifestation of the fruits of the Spirit relate to obedience, holiness and truth?

These are just some examples of how disagreement tests this love and truth to which the church of God is called as the body of Christ. Disagreement invites us to reflect afresh on the gift and calling to be Christ's people. It has the potential to pull us apart, to create division or separation in order to achieve clarity at the price of unity. Or it has the potential to draw us into an uneasy compromise beneath which differences continue to simmer and threaten to erupt under the pressures of change. The potential for harm lurks under both these ways forward.

But with openness and imagination about what could be, disagreement also has the potential to create a space into which

God speaks to us about our shared life and calling as followers of Jesus Christ and about the ‘not yet’ of all our understandings of God and the church we are called to be.

In engaging with *Living in Love and Faith*, churchgoers across the country have explored questions about what it means to be human. The thousands of people who took part in this learning and listening together shared their reflections about the experience of engaging with disagreement and difference. Sometimes this disagreement was ‘in the room’, sometimes it was between the gathered group and the people depicted in the story films and the views described in the resources. Some found it a painful experience and were unsure of its value. Some chose not to engage for fear of being harmed emotionally and spiritually. Some chose not to engage for fear of being harmed by being exposed to a perspective which, in their view, had no legitimacy.

Many, however – perhaps even most – described their engagement across their differences as a deeply positive experience: making discoveries and exploring – even disagreeing about – important and personal questions about our shared humanity brought people into closer relationship with one another. There was energy and meaning when talking about things that churches have largely avoided. It’s as if ‘church’ had come to life in a different and unexpected way. How do we honour and hold together this desire for deeper relationship within the church that disagreement has fostered, with the conviction of some that particular disagreements necessarily push us apart?

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unexpected way.

So in the final part of ‘taking stock’ we touch on the various images and metaphors that help us to understand our life together as church and explain why we have chosen to explore further the image of friendship to stimulate our reflections and conversations about the church’s unending task of discerning

the way ahead in the context of diversity, difference and disagreement.

## Discernment and being church

In creating human life, God creates human community. The only reality that is not good in the accounts of creation in the opening chapters of the bible is *being alone* (Genesis 2.18). Human life requires company to be sustained. In the beginning, God creates people to be with God and with each other. Soon after the beginning the people God creates turn from God and turn away from each other. They hide from God and hurt each other. So God chooses a people, within the people of humanity, to draw all the peoples of the earth into God's way and will through God's word, and to know again the blessing of God's presence. In the Old Testament, Israel is the people God has gathered, called to embody God's love and draw others nearer to God.

In the New Testament, building on the testimony of Israel, the circle widens even further, and the church of Jesus Christ comes into existence following his death and resurrection. Those who follow him are given, as John's Prologue puts it, 'power to become children of God' (John 1.12). No-one is forced into the people of God, but once they accept the invitation to enter, their identity and fundamental relationships change: they become part of something bigger than themselves. As they become friends of God, they also become part of a network of God's friends. As they become children of God, they become part of the family or household of God. No Christian is a Christian on their own, they are always part of the community of believers. This community is not chosen, it is given, and it is as a community as a whole that it embodies and reflects the life of Christ, so that it can become a blessing to others.

As Jesus Christ – the life of God embodied in the life of humanity – encounters the world with all its troubles, in its sin and suffering,

the kingdom of God breaks in, healing the sick, delivering the oppressed, bringing good news to the poor, forgiving the sinner, and knitting a new community together. The good news – the gospel – that the kingdom of God has come near, is that it comes near through Jesus, not only by what he says and does but by who he is.

The kingdom that Jesus brings is manifested in the community that Jesus gathers. The kingdom is encountered in the people Jesus encounters. This is not the same as saying the church and the kingdom are the same thing. Jesus' encounter with the creation is ongoing. In that sense, the church, like the kingdom, is dynamic. The church is and is becoming and is to come. Jesus is at once the Christ who gathers a people around him, and the missional Christ, reaching out to others.

All of these claims, these multiple connections between creation, kingdom, church and Christ can be seen in the first chapter of Colossians in a passage that has the feel of an early creed.

**He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him.**

**He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.**

**For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.**

Here we can see one of the images of the church used in the New Testament, especially by the writers of the epistles. It is the image of the church as a *body*, not just any body but as a particular body, as the body of which Jesus Christ is the head. The image, then, more accurately, is an image of Christ. The cosmic Christ described so expansively in Colossians 1 has a body, and that is the church. Another image that works in a similar way is the image of Christ with his *bride*, the church, to whom he is bound in covenant and mystery (Ephesians 5.25-33).

An image that can be detected in Colossians and can be traced to the words of Christ in the gospels, especially John, is Jesus as the new *temple* into whom his followers are built as a dwelling place for God (Ephesians 2.17-22). A closely related image is of the church as a '*holy, royal priesthood*' offering 'spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (1 Peter 2.4-8). As '*a royal priesthood*' the church is also '*a holy nation, God's own people*' – God's *laos* – called to bear witness to God's action in human history culminating in the work of Christ (1 Peter 2.9). These images have formed the backbone to the Western understanding of the church for centuries.

All these pictures are communal pictures: a believer on their own is not a temple, or a family, or a priesthood. It is only together that Christians fulfil their calling as God's people. It may be worth noting, too, that these images are about the whole church, not subsections or local versions of it. The interdependence of Christians works at multiple levels: locally, regionally, ecumenically, interculturally, through space and time.

None of these images stand alone, but rather, they offer different and complementary perspectives on what it means to be church and to be formed into being church. Both of these aspects exist at the same time: we are church, simply because God has reached out to us; but we are also being formed into the church as we learn and grow into our identity as disciples who live and learn together. The fact that we still need to grow as a church is

seen in our inability to live together well: in the continued exclusion of various groups of people; in fraught relationships; in the failures within our life together, particularly in the area of safeguarding.

At times the very images given in Scripture have been used to oppress, too. The image of the kingdom, for instance, has, at various time in history, been used to model the church on oppressive hierarchical secular structures; in the same way, the image of the church as bride has been used to justify the subordination of women to men, with the justification that the church is subordinate to Christ. Any image can be distorted and misused, for that is the nature of human beings' propensity to sin. In addition, images and metaphors are very tied to the culture and even the language that gave birth to them, and therefore not all images will speak in the same way into contemporary culture and to every person. As such, while it is important to hold the different metaphors together, it is also appropriate to ask some questions.

Images and metaphors are not the only way to think about church. The Church of England's tradition of ecclesiology – how we think about church – is deeply rooted in the formula used in the creeds, that the church is 'one, holy, catholic, and apostolic'. The Church of England itself is 'part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church'.<sup>1</sup> This recognises that the local church (here, England-based and Anglican in form) is not the whole church, and it therefore always needs to connect to and learn from the wider church in this land and beyond. These four marks of the church are not held by Anglicans only; as they are found in the creeds, they are shared widely by most Christian churches, and to root our understanding of church within them is in and of itself an act of unity and catholicity, and a recognition of our interdependence.

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<sup>1</sup> The Declaration of Assent (the official statement that ministers, lay and ordained, are required to agree to).

We have seen that we could explore what it means to be church in many different ways, each with a rich tradition of use, offering many connotations that would help us reflect on our life together. All these images work together and, to a degree, depend on one another to build up a fuller picture of what God is doing in knitting together a transformed people. There is no space to plumb the depths of each of these images here – it would fill many books! But we encourage readers to hold these images in mind as part of the rich tapestry of Christian thinking about church.

At the heart of all these ways of understanding and describing church lies the fact that relationship with God simultaneously creates relationship with all other Christians – over time, space, culture and all possible human differences. In Christ, all the differences that often separate and cause human beings to misunderstand, to disagree and hurt one another, all of these are brought into God, and reconciled through Christ (Colossians 1.19). The challenge for the church is to be transformed into this new reality. The Apostle Paul speaks powerfully of the struggle between ‘old life’ and ‘new life’ within himself as an individual in many of the epistles. This same struggle is at work in the church more widely. The church is in an in-between state – being sanctified, being made holy and united – but not there yet. And the process, just as with individuals, is rarely smooth or easy, yet it is core to belonging to God.

In these pages, the aim is very modest. We explore one aspect of being church: what it means to be a community of the friends of Jesus. We have chosen this image because friendship is a human relationship open to everyone. Unlike the call to be a father, mother, brother, sister, wife or husband, which is only given to some, we can all be friends. It is a gift from God and excludes no one. It is also an image that resonates, though not necessarily harmoniously, with our culture, perhaps more than ‘bride’ or ‘body’ or ‘kingdom’; it bears fewer negative or problematic connotations, and because it has been used less,

it carries less weight from history. It is also the relationship into which Jesus calls his followers.

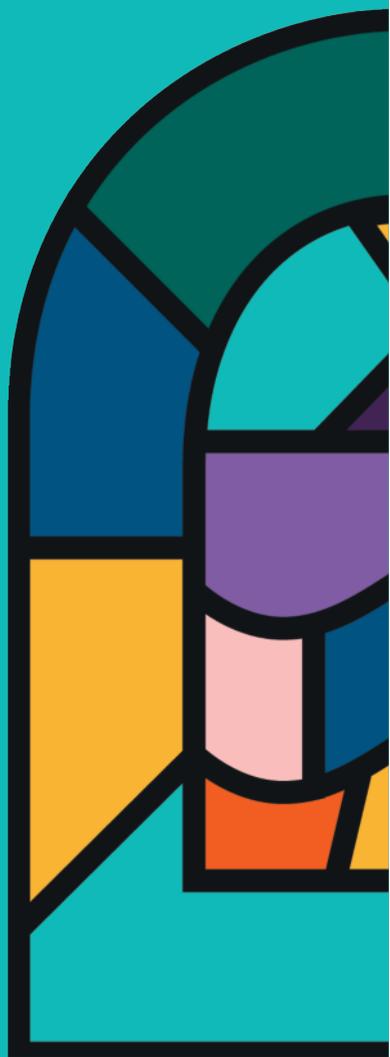
Friendship is the word we often use for close relationships. How might it apply in our situation as the church seeks to discern ways forward in times of disagreement and change? Can friendship be both sustained and deepened by disagreement, in the way that some seem to have experienced in their engagement with one another? Is there a time when friendships need to be ended or recast as a result of disagreement, as some have suggested in their response to engaging with LLF? How might thinking about what it means to be church within the frame of friendship help us to better understand the quandary we find ourselves in?

Might understanding ourselves as a community of the friends of Jesus Christ offer new insights into what it means to be church in a world so riven with disagreement and division? Might it help us to see not only friendship, but church – our life together as and in the body of Christ – as a gift from God?

We begin by taking a closer look at friendship and its different guises in history, in society today and in Scripture.

CHAPTER 2

# Friendship



Human beings are relational. We do not exist without relationships. Relationships give us meaning, and shape our identity within a complex network of culture, family, friendship, acquaintances, neighbourhood and so on. Human beings long for relationships of all kinds. All we need to do is look at the world of cinema. Hollywood is built on the yearning for meaningful relationships, whether of the romantic kind, or of great friendships forged in adversity, or the complexities of families. Yet Hollywood also reflects our society, its longings, its foibles and inadequacies, and the ways in which we have changed over time. Hollywood both reflects and shapes our ideas of what we desire. The LLF learning resources have explored in some detail how romantic and family relationships have changed profoundly over the last century. Other relationships have changed, too. The way we relate in churches, at work, in local communities has changed, and the way in which we understand friendship, in all its varieties and gradations, has changed. This does not mean we are in a uniquely different position in history, or that the church hasn't experienced deep challenges or disagreements before, even similar ones, as well as challenges in relationships. However, our aim in this chapter is to try and glimpse some of the particular challenges of today, in the Church of England. Chapter 3 will explore the history of friendship in philosophy and theology in some more detail.

## The changing shape of friendship

The human desire for strong friendships is deep seated; it permeates the pages of literature, of philosophy and of religious texts through the centuries. A central Old Testament metaphor for the relationship between God and Israel is 'the friendship of the Lord'; friendship is also explored through the bonds between specific people – Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan, Job and his friends, Elijah and Elisha, Daniel with Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego. In the New Testament, Jesus has specific friendships

with his disciples, as well as with Mary, Martha and Lazarus. He calls his followers friends rather than servants, and is disparaged for being a 'friend of sinners'.

Classical philosophers like Cicero and Aristotle mused on the nature of friendship, while great epics like the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* explored friendships (like Achilles and Patroclus). Varied Christian thinkers such as Augustine, Aelred of Rievaulx, Thomas Aquinas and C. S. Lewis have all reflected on friendship, its nature as a type of relationship open to everyone, and some of its distinctively Christian features.

The yearning for great, intense friendship is still here today – as testified by the popularity of literature and films focused on the theme of friendship. 'Friendship' seems to be an ever-present part of human life, something human beings desire, because they know it will enhance their life. Yet the contours of friendships have not always been the same. What we mean by 'friends' and 'friendship' is conditioned and shaped by culture and context, and to speak of friendship today holds both continuity and discontinuity with how Scripture, literature and other sources have spoken of friendship in the past, and with the shape of intimate relationships throughout history. Who can be friends with whom has changed over time, and at times, has been hotly contested – friendships across ethnic groups, across social classes or political divides have often raised eyebrows – and worse. Friendships are part of the way in which identity and belonging are expressed. Today people are 'friends' on social media with hundreds of others they may never meet. This will often include 'church' friends, both near and far. In many ways, it is easier than ever to connect with the wider church. Curating a 'friends list' is a way of positioning oneself within this new universe, and to signal belonging to groups, movements and ways of thinking, and 'unfriending' or 'blocking' those who offend one's sensibilities or differ from one's own opinions is as easy as pressing an icon on a screen. While friendships have always been a social marker that

enables identification with certain groups, and potentially disrupts the usual groupings of society (as with Jesus and 'sinners'), there is a looseness to the way the term is used today, and to how friends are made and lost or rejected.

In the Old Testament, for instance, the word for friend also meant 'neighbour'. To be a friend implied physical proximity. In pre-industrial societies, populations were relatively static – although, of course, migrations due to external events and search for work and resources have always formed part of human experience. However, the degree and frequency of mobility has increased significantly in the UK over the last hundred years, and this has caused a shift in relationships.<sup>2</sup> The idea of 'mobility' is not simply about migration, or moving between different locations in the country, but about the degree of mobility in daily life due to new modes of transport. In a non-globalised, less technologically based society, geographical mobility was less than it is today. It was likely that potential friendships would be drawn from the local community, with limited choice, and nowhere to go following a breakdown of relationship, in contrast with the endless potential acquaintances of social media.

Online, it is easy not only to terminate a 'friendship', but even block its fallout from sight. In relation to church communities, mobility, transport and online services offer the possibility of choosing a community that suits us. We can easily change communities if we wish to, beyond the two or three churches that may be within walking distance.

In contrast, the givenness of relationship with those around a discrete geographical area meant that classical definitions and

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<sup>2</sup> This changing context is explored at length in the first chapter of the *Mission-Shaped Church* report (Church House Publishing, 2004), though it has changed further with the advent of social networks and increased digitalisation.

descriptions of friendship often did not focus only or primarily on mutual enjoyment and choice, but had utilitarian components – friends help one another, are useful to each other and work towards the good of the other. And conversely, a fallout was more difficult because the other person would still be close by, and any ongoing relationships within the local community would also be affected by the breakdown. While these elements are still present in contemporary definitions of friendship, they do not necessarily bear the same weight. In places of enforced geographical proximity, in the past as today, friendship often matters to survival and good life, and the line between friendship and family is thinner: family is given, not chosen; friends are chosen to a greater degree, but when the pool is limited, making good enough friendships is an imperative of life in close communities.

Mobility and privilege have an interesting overlap here: those who can be more mobile in daily life (through means of transport, physically and economically), have more choices and are less dependent on relationships with those in close proximity. A number of studies in recent years have highlighted the differences in expectations of friendships between less mobile working-class communities and more mobile, and affluent middle-class communities.<sup>3</sup> In the more affluent and geographically mobile social groups, expectations of friends are different. They usually do not affect one's ability to survive or have expectations about practical interdependence. Rather, they tend to be based more on voluntary association and enjoyment. This is not to romanticise the past, or groups that are still geographically more static today, but simply point to the different dynamics that can underlie what we call 'friendship'.

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<sup>3</sup> Spencer, L., & Pahl, R. (2006). *Rethinking friendship: Hidden solidarities today*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Walker, K. (1995). "Always there for me": Friendship patterns and expectations among middle- and working-class men and women. *Sociological Forum* 10(2): 273-296.

In many parts of British society, friends are increasingly defined as people one enjoys spending time with, and are 'worth' investing in. Expectations of personal fulfilment through friendship may be higher, while family is seen as 'luck of the draw': as has been said, we cannot choose our families but we can choose our friends.

**In many parts of British society, friends are increasingly defined as people one enjoys spending time with, and are 'worth' investing in.**

If friendships are based primarily on personal choice, however, rather than forming part of a thick network of relationships (neighbourhood, workplace, church, social activities, family relations), they become correspondingly more fragile. Sociologist Anthony Giddens has described the phenomenon as the rise of 'pure relationship':<sup>4</sup> instead of a relationship being sustained partly by external ties, it becomes primarily associational and voluntary. It continues only as long as both partners feel it is satisfying or beneficial. Giddens' analysis is controversial but helps illustrate the changing nature of how we relate to one another and applies easily to the type of online 'friendships' described earlier.

We must be careful, however, not to draw these lines too sharply. Ancient texts, including the Old Testament, still illustrate the voluntary nature of *deep* friendship. One may have many friends, but deep friendships have an additional quality to mutual dependence and life together. The story of Ruth and Naomi illustrates the point well: they were related, but there came a point at which the two were expected to part ways, being from different ethnic groups, and Naomi's son, Ruth's husband, having

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<sup>4</sup> Anthony Giddens (1990), *The Consequences of Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press. Anthony Giddens (1991), *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in Late Modern Age*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

died, with no child to cement a continuing relationship. Even so, Ruth chose to stay with Naomi, despite their family relationship dissolving, and the ethnic divide between them. Similarly, David and Jonathan remained friends despite being on two different sides of the battle lines between Saul and David. In both cases, the continuing friendship is freely chosen and nurtured, even when other thick ties are ruptured or risk getting in the way. Likewise, Jesus has many friends, but there is a closeness with Peter, James and John, and one of Jesus's disciples, perhaps John, is referred to as 'the disciple whom Jesus loved'. This points to a gradation in friendships, together with a complex interplay between context and choice.

It is also worth noting that both ends of the spectrum offer opportunities and risks, and which point on that scale seems more attractive may well depend on context and culture. The more traditional end offers greater stability, and opportunities for maturing character as one is forced to deal with difference in constructive ways. The other end of the spectrum tends to offer greater equality and respect across gender and other identity markers and friendships are less constrained by unhelpful social divisions. They can, though, easily become more consumerist, and give opportunities simply to sidestep Jesus' command to love not just our friends, but our enemies also.

## Friendship under strain

In this changing context of friendship, it is easier, perhaps, for friendships to break under strain. Strain in friendship however is and always has been part of the story. Biblical pictures of friendship are not entirely rosy; friendships sour and sometimes break. The Old Testament contains a surprisingly high number of references to 'failed' friendships: disloyal friends appear in lament Psalms (e.g. 28, 35, 38, 88); in Proverbs and the prophets, friendships that do not fulfil expectations are a threat to social

cohesion and a symbol of social decline (e.g. Micah 7.5; Jeremiah 9.3).

The conflict between Job and his friends movingly explores the theme of failure in friendships in times of suffering: the friends initially try to do what is right, but quickly let their own thoughts and anxieties get in the way of caring for their distressed friend. As they argue with each other, particularly about their understanding of God, they contribute to Job's distress rather than comforting him. Yet the end of Job's story is instructive, as God rebukes the friends, and instructs Job to offer a sacrifice on their behalf: fracture of friendship is not final. Rather, God moves both sides towards an acknowledgement of wrong for the friends, and forgiveness for Job. The role of God in inviting the repairing of friendship is key – it is God who initiates the restoration, which gives the movement its theological weight. A fractured friendship is of enough significance for God to intervene in the sweep of the story.

Failures in friendship are depicted in various ways in Scripture: rejection is often central, particularly during a time of need; paying back evil for good and violence (including in words) are also considered deep breaches of friendship, as are deceit, betrayal or rejoicing over a friend's problems and pain. However a friendship was formed, therefore (by choice, necessity or proximity), friendship carries expectations, not dissimilar (though more limited) to those of family. When those expectations are frustrated, the pain that is felt is acute, and the breakdown ripples beyond the relationship itself. The presence of expectations is key to the breakdown and the pain that comes with it. Friends are expected to enable each other's flourishing, and failed friendships often yield more bitter conflict than a more straightforward enmity.

The New Testament tells a similar story, and the most famous fractured friendship is that of Jesus and Judas, as Judas betrays Jesus to his death. The Gospel of John is particularly moving

here, with the washing of the feet and the betrayal of Jesus brought together in the narrative of Jesus' last evening with his friends. In John 13, the story opens with 'Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him.' Simultaneously, we are told of Jesus' love for 'his own' and Judas' decision to betray that love. The washing of feet follows, and Jesus does not omit Judas. Straight after the washing of feet, at the table, Jesus draws attention to the coming betrayal – giving Judas a chance to turn back. Judas leaves, and Jesus keeps up the conversation with his friends, and points to

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another betrayal to come – Peter denying him three times. The relationship with Peter will be restored. The relationship with Judas is never mentioned again, and John's words about Jesus 'loving them to the end' are left hanging, leaving a legacy of speculation through the ages.

As we face the tensions in our Church today, how do these stories of strained, betrayed and fractured friendship help us think of the roots of our disagreement, the impact of the strain on ourselves and others, and the way in which we might go forward under God?

## Friendship and church

While in Scripture friendship is an important category, particularly in the Gospels, and most especially in John, the church over the centuries has not drawn heavily on the image of friendship as a metaphor or undergirding for its life together. The image of the body, the family, the temple and marriage have been stronger drivers for the church's self-understanding. All of them are still deeply relevant and rooted in Christian history and draw our attention to the interdependence of all members of the church and its given unity: Christians belong together because they are children of God, they are given to one another rather than choosing one another. This may be slightly strange, given that Jesus speaks specifically of followers as 'friends', and we'll explore this tension more fully in Chapter 3. Formal theology may not use the image much in relation to the church as a whole, but if we look at the expectations we have of one another in local congregations and wider gatherings, and the way we relate as fellow church members, it is worth asking whether these expectations and relationships are shaped, at least partly, by ideas of friendship.

Many of the LLF responses seem to suggest that by engaging in conversations that are more personal and relevant to everyday life, friendships within the church community have begun to form in a way that has been significant and appreciated. Some have

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indicated their yearning for more relationship-building conversations like this. Some emphasise in their response the desire to maintain friendship with people in their church communities with whom they disagree. Often, however, this desire is not experienced as genuine because at its root is still a desire to see the 'other' change. Is wishing for the 'other' to change a necessary bar to relationship, or can genuine friendship exist across deep differences of opinion? How far do we need to agree in order to relate well? How far can continuing disagreement and argument form part of healthy relationships? What part does time play in giving the space for the patient resolution of difficulties between friends?

While friendship has changed in its meaning and social expression, so has the life of the Church. A more geographically settled model gave rise to the parish system in the Church of England, so that every human community could be formed into the community of the Church. Today, things are much more fluid. It is possible to travel to many other churches, both Anglican and other. There is an increasing movement between different churches, which reinforces our belonging together across difference, but simultaneously enhances a culture that prizes individual choice. As the Church of England seeks to inhabit a post-colonial, post-pandemic, postmodern world many models of the past are left wanting. That may sound like too many 'posts', but it points to the state of flux of the Church today.

**What does it mean to belong together? How do we do this in ways that are real, and truthful about quite how difficult it can be?**

As has been already noted, challenged by decreasing attendance and resources, and a changing place within culture, the Church is facing many urgent structural and missional questions. What does it mean to be church?

How do we relate to one another? What does it mean to belong together? How do we do this in ways that are real and truthful about how difficult it can be? And how do we learn to be the church, rather than assume that it should come naturally – after all, while the Gospel is good news, it is also not easy to follow Jesus, as he points out to his disciples! And one of the difficulties, is to learn how to build different types of relationships that do not shy away from the command to love one another.

As well as local mobility for those with the means to travel, for those with digital access and desire, the internet offers options of belonging across continents and time zones. The ability to choose one's church community is based partly on privilege. The wealthier and more comfortable one is, the more mobile, and therefore the more choice is available. How does our willingness to discard friends or church speak into other divisions in our society? Has the Church been guilty of enabling these divisions to overshadow its life? In his first letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul has stern words to a church that allowed social classes and sectarian views to divide its life. Yet to the Corinthians, it must have seemed that they were simply doing what everyone else does.

Culture is something we inhabit without thinking most of the time. If we take a step back, how has our culture affected the way in which we are church?

In pre-industrial times, the local church was likely to be a subset of a local community. Multiple other ties would link members in the community through family, business and practical help, and church was a place of deepening existing relationships and

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<sup>4</sup> Changes in patterns of belonging and the role of networks are explored in *Mission-Shaped Church* and related publications.

casting them in a different light. In geographically mobile communities and in many urban communities, the 'local church' is a less identifiable entity; it often has a mix of locals and those who travel in. Those who attend often do not know many others when they first join, since the rest of their life is spent in different networks of work, family and leisure, or they may have moved into the area from elsewhere. The life of the local church therefore often involves having to create a new community, rather than working from an existing (however loose) community.<sup>5</sup> There is therefore less of a sense of being put together and more of a sense of having chosen one another, which coincides with common models of 'friendship' as voluntary association, of a choice to spend time with like-minded people whom we get on with in ways that enhance our wellbeing.

The weight of voluntary association in church is enhanced by the expectations of wider culture: when moving into a new area, churchgoers will often go church shopping (steeplechasing!) in order to find the 'right fit', in line with the expectation of enjoyment, personal fulfilment or the needs of family. Church risks becoming something to be consumed, a commodity among commodities. If one church does not work, there is usually the possibility of another. This fundamentally different way of coming into belonging means that an exploration of underlying assumptions and expectations using the friendship model may be particularly pertinent in this place and time.

To think about friendship may help us explore why church life is sometimes challenging. Of the different relationships in our lives, it is hard to categorise how we relate in church: those we meet are not strictly speaking family, nor are they work colleagues. The regularity of contact may make them more than acquaintances.

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But are we expecting them to be 'friends', and if so, what kind of expectations are we bringing to these relationships?

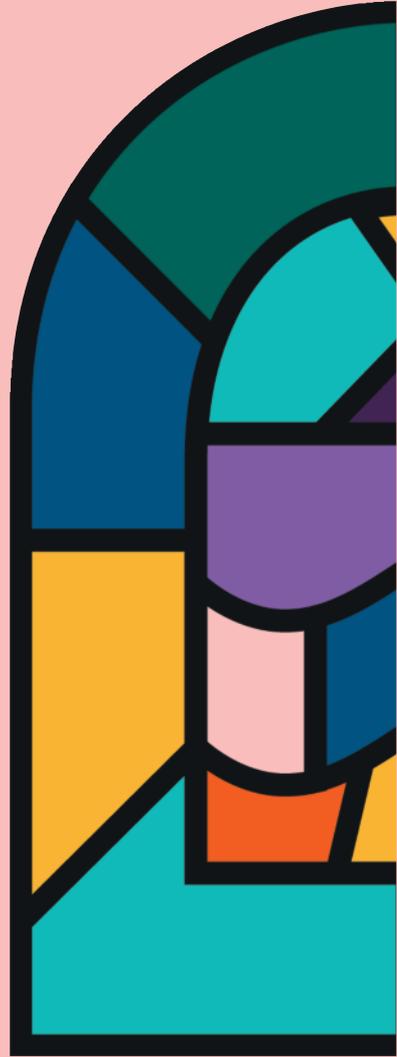
Do we expect church relationships to work on the model of associational friendship? If so, does this help explain why we struggle to stay together across disagreements? In a culture which highly values individual choice and consumerism as expressions of our identity, to suggest, for example, that we belong together by virtue of God's action, is not readily received. The idea that I cannot choose one church or another, that I cannot say that I do not need another Christian because I disagree with them, do not like them, or have been hurt by them, runs counter to the way our lives are often ordered, and what we might consider to be our 'rights'. It also runs counter to what is possible and easy, and prompts questions of how we walk best together, and resolve questions that go beyond disagreement and move into harm, something we will explore further in Chapter 5.

Our current understandings of friendship may help illuminate some of the dynamics within our struggles, and the temptation to walk away from one another. It may also help us be more realistic about what church can and cannot be. If 'friendship' is an unspoken expectation, can we speak of it more explicitly, and explore how Christian friendship is reshaped and challenged by the gospel? Can we enable conversation and learning between geographically settled and geographically mobile churches? How do we enable formation into 'the way of the Lord' that reflects what it means to be a 'friend of the Lord' and therefore have our desires and relationships transformed?

**How do we enable formation into 'the way of the Lord' that reflects what it means to be a 'friend of the Lord' and therefore have our desires and relationships transformed?**

**CHAPTER 3**

Friendship  
as Gift



How are the answers to these questions affected when we explore friendship as a gift that God gives in giving us the life of the church? It is to this we now turn.

**This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.<sup>13</sup> No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.<sup>14</sup> You are my friends if you do what I command you.<sup>15</sup> I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.<sup>16</sup> You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.<sup>17</sup> I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.**

**John 15.12-17**

In this extraordinary passage, Jesus invites his disciples effectively to join him in his mediating position between the Father and the world. Jesus, the Son, is sent by the Father into the world. In the world, the mutual love between Father and Son is experienced by those who follow Jesus as a fulness of 'grace and truth' (1.14). But these followers – disciples drawn from the world into which Jesus is sent – do not remain passive recipients of Jesus' grace and truth. In calling them his friends, Jesus makes them active participants in his divine mission, appointing them to bear fruit in the world, sustained by the same love that propels Jesus in his mission from the Father.

The disciples, then, share in Jesus' divine mission. This message is all the more shocking given that the relationship Jesus has with the Father is not the kind of relationship that mortals can expect to have with God. Indeed, before we get to chapter 15, a key theme of John's Gospel appears to be that the relationship between Son and Father is not only intimate but unique. Right at the beginning of the Gospel, Jesus is referred to as the divine

Word, the Son who is 'at the Father's side' from eternity (John 1.18). The Son is God (1.1). Father and Son defer to each other: Jesus describes the Father as 'greater than I' (John 14.28); at the same time, we learn, the Father leaves all judgement to the Son (John 5.19-30). The only way for us to worship God is through acceptance of Jesus as the one glorified by the Father (chapters 6–12). To see and accept Jesus is to see and accept the one who sent him, God himself (chapters 12–13). It proves to be a difficult message for many who are initially drawn to Jesus, causing upset and even rejection (cf. John 6.60-66).

## Abiding in Jesus' love

What Jesus has to say about his unity with the Father challenges many of our ideas and assumptions of relating to God. A positive side to this challenge is that if we accept Jesus as the one sent and glorified by the Father, and if we are thus united with him, 'dwelling in' him, we can become participants in the intimate relationship between him and the Father. We learn this in the story of Jesus' last Passover meal with his disciples, and already before the point when Jesus addresses his disciples as his friends (chapter 15); namely, in the moment when Jesus kneels down to wash their feet, and his subsequent explanation of what he has done (chapters 13–17).

Jesus' washing the disciples' feet is a demonstration of him obeying the Father's commandment of love, and thus 'abiding' in the Father's love (15.9-10). Yet, as Jesus explains, this also sets an example for them: they, too, should 'wash one another's feet' (John 13.14). This, indeed, is his 'new commandment' for them: to love one another as Jesus has loved them (13.34). Not only are they recipients of the overflow of love between Jesus and the Father (as demonstrated in the foot washing), but they are to abide in that love precisely by putting this love into practice – by washing each other's feet, and many other acts of service and sacrifice.

The love between Jesus and the Father not only overflows in Jesus, and in his love for those he has gathered around him; it overflows further, moving his followers to do to each other as he does to them. Their active 'abiding' in Jesus' love draws from and echoes Jesus' active 'abiding' in the Father's love. They 'bear fruit' like vine branches do, sustained and nourished by the stem that carries them (John 15.1-8). The image of 'fruit' also emphasises the concrete and multiplying ways in which the love between Father and Son is to take shape in the world – in dirty feet lovingly washed, and countless other acts of loving service.

## Jesus' gift of friendship

Jesus thus draws his disciples into the love and intimacy that exists between him and the Father, sharing with them what he has received from the Father. This means that what up to this point may have seemed a straightforwardly unequal relationship – with Jesus being no more than the 'Lord and Teacher' of his followers (13.13-14), like any human rabbi or authority figure – turns out to involve a surprising element of equality: 'I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father' (15.15).

'Everything': the friendship to which Jesus invites his disciples is unreserved. And yet, this is not the kind of equality one might expect in any other friendship: an equality, that is, which is rooted in reciprocity, and in the friends' having an equal share in terms of what they both give and receive. For what is being shared between Jesus and his disciples is entirely Jesus' gift to them; and this, in turn, is what he has heard and received from the Father. This friendship, then, is based on divine revelation rather than human initiative. The 'equality' between Jesus and his disciple-friends – the fact that he shares with them everything – is rooted in a profound and abiding asymmetry: it is he, in

communion with the Father, and not the disciples, who initiates and sustains the friendship; whereas their relationship with him depends on an offer of friendship which transcends whatever they might have to offer.

In other words, just as there is an order to the relationship of love between Father and Son (it is the Father who sends the Son), so there is an order to the friendship between Jesus and his disciples.

First, it is Jesus who first loved them – by coming into the world, sent by the Father, to dwell among them and share with them God's love, truth and grace. What Jesus demonstrates and illustrates in washing their feet is that his love for them goes as far as him laying down his life for them (15:13); a humanly embodied expression of the perfect and unreserved divine love between him and the Father. This love, completely self-giving, is the basis (the 'vine') on which the disciples' relationship with Jesus is established, and which shapes the nature of their friendship with him. Jesus remains the vine on which they rest; the relationship is not reversible. Jesus himself drives home this point: 'You did not choose me but I chose you...' (15.16).

This irreversible order has implications, secondly, for the disciples' relationship among each other – a point that is especially relevant to our purposes as we reflect on the nature of the church. It is important to note that Jesus does not befriend his discipleship as individuals, chosen severally and separately. When Jesus addresses his disciples in this passage, he uses the second person plural ('ye' in the older translations, rather than 'thou'). They become Jesus' friends together, which implies they become friends of one another as well as (and as an implication of) becoming Jesus' friends.

Furthermore – and crucially – the friendship which Jesus establishes with and among his disciples, flows from and continues to depend on Jesus' gift of friendship to them. Indeed, in line with what was said earlier about Jesus' sharing what he has first received from the Father, we can see that his gift of friendship is rooted in the

dynamic of giving which is at the heart of the life of God: Jesus' giving himself to his disciples is an affirmation of the Father's having first given these to him (John 17.6).

Moreover, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in Jesus' name (John 14.26), will make those given to Jesus into the church, Jesus' Body. Jesus' gift of friendship, then, will be sustained and confirmed in the work of the Spirit, the advocate and sustainer, who dwells in the midst of Jesus' friends sustaining and forming them, and sending them out in fellowship into the world.

This gift of friendship, then, which originates in God, is demonstrated in Jesus' laying down his life for his friends. As soon becomes clear in the story John tells, this is a gift which none of his followers, not even his friends, will or can emulate. Peter famously demurs – 'I will lay down my life for you' – just as, earlier that evening, he had resisted Jesus' washing his feet, embarrassed as Jesus went on his knees for him. And just as Jesus had then explained that accepting his service was not optional, now, again, he challenges Peter's insistence on reciprocity: 'Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times' (John 13.37-38.) Jesus' gift of friendship to Peter and the others comes first; their friendship with him follows and flows from it.

The challenge to Peter highlights another element of asymmetry in this friendship, encapsulated in the challenge towards transformation. The disciples are welcomed into the relationship of Father and Son through the work of the Spirit, but within this relationship they enter a horizon of transformation. They enter as they are, accepted and loved, but are invited to change. The friendship of Jesus is not conditional, but it is transformational. The disciples are called to a different life, not simply within their relationships with one another, but in the entire way in which they inhabit the world. Friendship with Jesus comes with hope and challenge, and opens the disciples to the work of the Spirit in making them holy.

## Friends as given by Jesus

The same order which is at play between Jesus and his friends, also applies to the relationships among ourselves as followers and friends of Christ – or, as we might say, as members of Christ’s church: the relationship we have with one another in Christ is an echo and extension of his primary gift of friendship to us.

But what exactly does this mean in practice? In John 15, as we saw, Jesus tells his disciples: ‘You did not choose me but I chose you’ (15.16). This means, first, that we are not free to shape or develop our friendships as we might wish: we are Jesus’ friends (and hence each other’s friends) if we do what Jesus commands us (15.14); if we love each other after the example of Jesus’ love for us, as demonstrated and illustrated in the foot washing.

This does not mean, as Jesus explains, that our obedience is to be unquestioning – in the way servants obey a master (in a relationship of inequality). For Jesus to befriend us, we saw, is to invite us to become participants in the economy of love and obedience that exists between him and the Father: ‘I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father’ (15.15). Divine freedom gives us freedom. We are free in our following and obeying; and because it happens in an economy of love, our freedom is expressed in love for the other rather than the self.

Thus, while we are primarily recipients of Jesus’ gift of friendship – a gift deriving from the Father’s self-giving to the Son, and vice versa – we are nonetheless invited to become active participants in this friendship.

Still, since Jesus’ gift of himself lies at the heart and basis of our friendship, it seems there are clear implications for how we practise this friendship, including how we relate to one another. As a disciple of Jesus, I may receive another disciple as my friend only in and with Jesus’ friendship with both of us – never in

isolation from Jesus' gift. And I, in turn, am given by Jesus to the other, just as they are given to me. Therefore, just as much as I am to give myself to them in friendship (following Jesus' example), so they are to give themselves to me. And that means, crucially, that *I need to learn to welcome and accept them, and their gift of friendship*, even if they or their gift are not what I was looking for. A powerful example of the dynamic at play here – perhaps indeed the paradigm case of Jesus' giving his disciples to one another – is when Jesus assigns Mary and 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' to one another as mother and son respectively, at the point of dying on the cross. The disciple freely takes Jesus' mother into his home and she freely joins him.

It may well be the case that, in many respects, our friendships are determined by the qualities and preferences each of us brings to the relationship – as discussed in Chapter 2. Nevertheless, when Jesus

Christ 'stands between' me and my brother or sister – between me and my friend-in-Christ.

initiates or enters a friendship between us, our relationship will end up being mediated by him. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggests in *Life Together*, Christ 'stands between' me and my brother or sister – between me and my friend-in-Christ.<sup>6</sup> To use Jesus' image in John 15 once again: we, the branches, are connected to each other only by virtue of resting in one and the same vine.

## The church as counter-cultural community of friends

How does this friendship 'economy' differ from the ways friendships are commonly formed and practised?

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<sup>6</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, SCM, London: 2015, Chapter 1.

It would be too easy to claim that, in contrast to friendship initiated by Jesus, all other friendships are simply based on 'choice'. There is some truth in this, to be sure, especially when we compare friendship with kinship relationships. You can choose your friends, and decide to end a friendship. Yet, as was already noted in the previous chapter, you cannot choose your family or stop being related to them. And yet, we certainly do not always choose our friends. Often we 'stumble upon' them, or discover over time that a neighbour, a teacher or a colleague has turned out to be a friend.

Furthermore, we should remember another point made in Chapter 2; namely, that choice tends to be the preserve of the more privileged: those who have the resources and indeed the leisure to 'invest' in friendships that seem worthwhile or life-enriching. For those less well off, however, 'choice' rarely defines friendships that matter most. Many of us simply cannot afford to be choosy in befriending people: as we face need and hardship, or worse – injustice, discrimination, racism, oppression – we are grateful for whatever friendly support and companionship are available to us.

That said, the 'economy' of these more common and messy friendships is not yet the 'economy' of Jesus' friendship. The former is one of mutual support forged by chance, dependence or hardship, or all of these together. Yet in the circle of Jesus' friendship, this dynamic of mutual support is opened up further from outside: what was primary becomes secondary, as the dynamic of mutual support becomes part of wider economy of friendship that is rooted in Jesus' original gift. Now, the friends are no longer dependent each other, but become recipients of Jesus' gift. Jesus, the 'vine', now sustains, shapes and feeds their mutual support and friendship. Their relationship's centre of gravity (to use a different image) now lies outside them, indeed beyond both of them: it lies in Jesus, and ultimately in the relationship between him and the Father.

It is Christ who shapes and gives life to the Church, not the Church which constitutes the identity of Christ.

This notion, incidentally, is key to St Paul's favourite image of the church as the body of Christ. Not only is the church Christ's body, but Christ is and remains the head of this body. So, while the church is united with Christ and participates in his risen life,

Christ is nevertheless more than the sum total of the church community. It is Christ who shapes and gives life to the church, not the church which constitutes the identity of Christ.

Once we see that the friendship in Jesus goes against the grain of our expectations – whether based on our qualities, choices, preferences and beliefs, or simply on our needs – we begin to realise that Jesus' friendship is a calling as well as a gift; a vocation, a task and a responsibility as well as a pleasure and a joy.

Our friendships are thus characterised by a radical focus on the other, yet one that is in turn focussed by The Other – Jesus himself, the Friend who unites us in the first place. This focus means that each of us are called to be willing to follow

The circle of Jesus' friends, the church, is by definition open to ever more friends being drawn in.

Jesus' example, offering ourselves to our friends, perhaps even giving our lives. Yet, as we have seen, there is more to it: to be a friend of Jesus also means to welcome those whom Jesus gives to us to be our friends; those, that is, whom we might not have chosen ourselves otherwise – or even have welcomed as our allies. Thus to welcome them, in Christ, is to welcome their gifts to us, too: gifts we might not have chosen, and which we may not even want. This, incidentally, has profound missional implications, for it means that the circle of Jesus' friends, the church, is by

definition open to ever more friends being drawn in by Jesus, 'the friend of sinners'. What is more: the church receives as much from those newly drawn in – the new friends given to it by Jesus – as these receive from the church.

## Disagreeing as friends of Jesus

Finally, this strange 'economy' of friendship cannot but affect the way in which friends might challenge and indeed disagree with each other. We are familiar, of course, with the ideal of candid speech in friendship, or the notion of a 'critical' friend. Yet, in the economy of Jesus' friendship, the critical perspective that the other brings is not ultimately in their gift, but flows from the unsolicited gift that is Jesus.

And this throws some light, too, on the issue of disagreement in the church of God – disagreement, that is, between Jesus' friends.

As we know from the gospels and other parts of the New Testaments, there has been disagreement and discord among the followers of Jesus from the very beginning – including Jesus' first disciples, and the first generations of Christians. To that extent, we might say with the writer of Ecclesiastes, there is 'nothing new under the sun'. Jesus' followers will no doubt continue to quarrel, disagree and fall out until Christ returns.

Yet one might argue that by describing our fellowship in Christ in terms of friendship, we have raised the stakes considerably. While one might expect to disagree and fall out with, say, family members or fellow citizens – that is, without ceasing to be family or fellow-citizens – it seems much harder for friendship to survive substantial disagreement. In fact, it seems the stakes are raised even further in our case, in that this friendship has nobody less than Jesus himself at its centre. How could we tolerate

disagreement in this friendship, rooted as it is (or at least supposed to be) in the unity and love of Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

On the other hand, we should also note the point made earlier; namely, that, in contrast to friendship in its common form, this friendship is resolutely not in our gift, nor in our control. Once we take that into account, might the friendship that is and remains Jesus' gift paradoxically create space for – perhaps even be more robust in the face of – deep disagreement?

Might the friendship that is and remains Jesus' gift paradoxically create space for – perhaps even be more robust in the face of – deep disagreement?

There's a danger here, of course, of stretching our definition of friendship beyond recognition. To what extent does the 'strange' friendship we have due to Jesus' gift still bear any semblance to friendship in its everyday meaning? But perhaps key features of friendship as commonly understood and experienced can continue to play a role, even if the basic underlying 'economy' has shifted. Thus, while it may ultimately be Jesus alone who enables us to practise and 'abide in' friendships that are marked by profound disagreement – disagreement that would destroy other friendships – still we are to do so in ways that are recognisably 'friendly' (and not just to those who are disciples of Jesus): loving, respectful, careful, forbearing, forgiving, patient, and so on.

Many who engaged with others in the LLF Course found that by spending time using the Church of England's Pastoral Principles to explore some of the obstacles to good relating helped groups to engage with their disagreements in a more fruitful way.<sup>7</sup> The

*Difference Course* offers another example of practical ways in which friendship across difference can be deepened: being curious, being present and re-imagining are three habits that the *Difference Course* encourages people to adopt as they relate to people with whom they disagree or are very different from themselves, perhaps even emboldening them to make more daring relationships with people whom they once feared.<sup>8</sup>

With that in mind, it might be conceivable to feel, on the one hand, that our friendship as members of Christ's church has run aground on our disagreement, and yet to believe that we are nonetheless held – and held together – by Jesus' gifts of friendship. If this were possible, it would be because we would find it possible to continue to respond to the calling that comes with Jesus' gift: to receive those we disagree with as friends of Jesus, and hence as our friends, seeking their good and open to receiving their gifts.<sup>9</sup>

How does the gift of friendship relate to other gifts that God gives? What insights into friendship and being church can we gain by exploring the nature of the gifts that God gives? The next chapter recaps the gifts of learning, life, relationship, marriage and diversity that are explored in the LLF Book – in the light of the gift of friendship and being church.

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<sup>7</sup> The Pastoral Principles encourage individuals and church communities to identify and confess prejudice, ignorance, silence, misuse of power, fear and hypocrisy. Course and Booklet can be found on <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/general-synod/bishops/pastoral-advisory-group/pastoral-principles> accessed 5 August 2022].

<sup>8</sup> The Difference Course <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/priorities/reconciliation/difference-course> [accessed 5 August 2022].

<sup>9</sup> This also reflects the insights the Church of England has gained over the last few decades in its ecumenical conversations.

CHAPTER 4

Receiving and  
Understanding  
the Gifts of God



Chapter 2 provided insights into ideas about friendship in wider society and in Scripture, some of which are applicable to our life together in the Church of England. In Chapter 3, friendship is explored as gift. This ‘gift of friendship ... originates in God’ and is the unchosen, given way that Jesus’ disciples participate by the Spirit in the union between the Father and the Son.

**How should the inspiration of a foot-washing Saviour overflow in the Church as a community of friends?**

These insights invite questions about how the gift of friendship relates to what is said about ‘gift’ in the LLF Book and through the *Living in Love and Faith* process more generally: how should friendship with the one who holds nothing back from us shape our life lived together in love and faith? How should the inspiration of a foot-washing Saviour overflow in the Church as a community of friends? These questions are

especially important in light of concerns about disagreement among friends that were considered at the end of Chapter 3.

## The gift of learning

One of the gifts which the LLF Book emphasises is the gift of learning – of discipleship. To be obedient friends of Jesus is to participate in God’s love as those to whom the Father’s heart is being made known. Among the kinds of learning which God gives, learning how to live a holy life has a particular significance for how the church is to live together well as friends. The LLF Book (221) comments that there ‘should be no element of the church’s life that is immune from questioning in the light of the loving holiness of Jesus Christ. For the church as a whole as well as for its individual members, the call to holiness often needs to be heard as a call to repentance and to reformation of life’ and so is always reliant upon ‘God’s mercy, God’s forgiveness and God’s help’. ‘For the Church of England today’, the book continues

(222), 'questions about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage are questions about holy living'.

Questioning allows the possibility of repentance, of change of mind – of learning in love and faith to live as disciples of the Holy One. To learn *how* to live a holy life – to learn holiness – is God's calling to us, both corporate and personal. That we have to ask 'how' recognises that there is uncertainty and difference among us. Nonetheless, this learning is a calling given by God to humanity in general and to the church in particular. Jesus' people – the body of Christ – are made to be friends of one another. Therefore, learning how to live a holy life is something these friends must do together as they seek to know, love and obey God. In so doing, we will learn to love both one another and those who might yet become friends of Jesus.

Such learning presses us, as friends, towards reflection, deliberation and, in the end, to decision-making. As such, learning is intimate, risky and costly. To learn holiness together will involve discerning a practical way ahead. To do this – to decide on a path – we need to look backwards as well as forwards: to reflect as well as to deliberate. What may be learned of God's gifts by

looking back on what has been said in order to look forward to discern the holy way of life which God is giving to the Church of England? In particular, how might what the LLF Book has said about 'gift' help us to discern how to live and learn in love and faith, as friends, amidst the responsibilities and tasks laid upon us today?

**How might what the LLF book has said about 'gift' help the Church to discern how to live and learn in love and faith, as friends, amidst the responsibilities and tasks laid upon us today?**

This question of friendship, asked in reference to the Church of England as ‘part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church’ (Preface to The Declaration of Assent), can only be fully answered if we bear in mind the way our words, decisions and actions affect other friends of Jesus in other churches. For no church does its discerning, deliberating and deciding alone. Friendship across the whole church of God remains vital for learning.

With this said, a series of statements from LLF concerning ‘gift’ provide avenues for learning. They offer a context for understanding the call and gift of friendship in the Church, the communion within which our reflections and deliberations must resolve on decisions.

Four further statements map out aspects of the journey friends may take, as we learn to receive God’s good gifts. The first statement opens up the broadest possible vista in which to appreciate God’s gifts.

## The gift of life

### ‘the gift that God gives to all creation is life’ (15)

Life is what God gives and God is always the first giver. Unless we learn this then we can learn nothing at all. ‘The Bible begins with God and the life God gives...It ends with life again, and with God’ (12). At the pivot between beginning and ending is Jesus. ‘What are you looking for?’ (John 1.38), Jesus asks of those following him. In other words, ‘What are you seeking? What are you longing for? What do you desire?’ (12). The Word himself is the gift given, there in the beginning, among us in incarnation, and now present by the Spirit: ‘full of grace and truth’ (John 1.14), through whom and in whom we may now receive ‘grace upon grace’ (John 1.16).

As we learned in Chapter 3, friendship is possible because it is Jesus who first loved us. Jesus said 'I chose you; you did not choose me' (John 15.16). Just so this grace upon grace, given in Jesus Christ, through whom all things come into being, is a unilateral gift. Our creation was not solicited by us; our species did not initiate the life it has been given, still less the creation of which it is part. It was given. It came into being through God's Word. Paul, addressing the Athenians, told them that God 'himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things' (Acts 17.25). Nor, of course, did we initiate the renewal of created life in the incarnate Word, Jesus; and we did not recognise him when he was given (John 1.10-11).

Just as we mortals did not choose gravity – gravity is there before us and now maintains us in our place so that we can participate in certain kind of relationships within the life that God has brought into being through Jesus Christ; just so, as we learned in Chapter 3, Jesus exerts a similar gravitational effect on the friends whom he draws together to one place – he sets them first on their knees, and only then on their feet, thereby readying them for friendship with God and one another.

So whatever it means for friends to live and learn in love and faith, it must be responsive to what God has given us in Jesus Christ, through whom all things come into being. Whatever it means for the Church to learn must begin from what God has done without us, before us, and – we must confess – in spite of us. We did not choose the vine by whom we come to life. If we are fruitful, it is by receiving the friendship of Jesus and abiding in that friendship with Jesus and one another. Receiving life means inhabiting the body of Christ. This means receiving the friends of Christ. If our feet are to be kept on the ground, walking forward together as friends, following Jesus, it will be by God's grace upon grace. We are, from beginning to end, those who receive and inhabit a gift which comes from God.

Beginning and never departing from God's gift of life in Jesus Christ, the LLF Book explores four aspects of the learning journey upon which Jesus' friends are called to go. This is a journey towards understanding how both God's way of giving and God's gifts may grace the church as a teaching and learning community: a community which, while characterised by different kinds of diversity, can hope to mediate the truth about God's gifts, living and learning together in love and faith.

Whether we are – or become – this community is of utmost significance. And so the LLF Book draws on words of John's gospel to present a specific, stark and urgent challenge to the Church of England:

**'Will we truly and fully entrust ourselves to this love by receiving the one through whom it has come? This love, this 'grace upon grace' (John 1.16) is the way of Jesus, and 'whoever disobeys the Son will not see life' (John 3.36).'** (14)

To take the venture of faith is then to receive the gift which has been given, in obedience to the Son and in the hope that we will see not death but life. We take this venture with faith in Christ and with the friends of Christ who have been given to us.

## The gift of life in relationship

**'The gift of life is given and received in and through many kinds of relationships: ways of togetherness, with God, with each other, and with the whole created order.'** (17)

We said that the LLF Book presents four aspects of the learning journey which God gives us as friends, in order that together we might understand God's giving and God's gifts. The first aspect of the Church's learning concerns how the gift of life permeates 'the whole created order'. The second aspect tells us that God has

given humanity patterns of relationship, paths of life, within which our love and faith are to be ordered; and within which learning about how to live a holy life may take place.

This is important for the character of the Church's discernment. The gift of life, while unchosen by us and often unrecognised by us, invites us to become knowing, loving, active participants. Once given, 'God's gift of life...makes us life-givers.' In particular, 'God's gift of love...enables us to share life with others and give life to others' (17). The paradigmatic form of that togetherness that 'underlies...life-bringing relationships...is friendship' (18).

Life, love, friendship and learning are here intertwined. A life of learning as friends is found in answering God's call 'to love this creation of which we are part' (17). Love makes a commitment to that which we desire to know. When Jesus asks, 'What are you looking for?', he is searching out what we love. For the friends who are drawn to Jesus, learning in love involves 'bringing people to the deepest truth about themselves' (18). In referring to Jesus' greeting of Judas as a friend, the LLF Book reminds us that our words and deeds may refuse the call of love and instead take the form of 'betrayal' – betraying ourselves and God, failing to love the life God has given.

Put positively, seeking to receive the gift of life in friendship is closely associated with a search for peace. This peace cannot be an avoidance of truth – including difficult truth; nor is peace an absence of interaction with others – being left alone in peace, a desire that is perhaps understandable when there is conflict about how to live together well. Perhaps, of course, some kind of peace might be found in departing from a source of conflict. But the full vision of peace set before us is a life of 'perfectly ordered and wholly concordant fellowship in the enjoyment of God, and of each other in God' (20). This communion, this union in love, is what the LLF Book encourages us to seek out, live and learn. For 'the life that God gives is life together' (15) – it is friendship together with Christ.

Receiving and communicating the life of love which God has given are not only about sharing what the church learns but also how it lives in love and faith while it learns – which might include times of disagreement. The third aspect of learning that the LLF Book invites us to explore is to consider what practical patterns of life cohere with God’s overall gift of life in relationship. And it is here that we encounter a measure of disagreement.

## The gifts of marriage and celibacy – and disagreement about them

Chapter 3 suggested that friendship with Jesus might create space for robust disagreement. Understanding the gifts of marriage and celibacy is one area that brings the friends of Jesus into sharp disagreement with one another.

It is worth reflecting on how marriage, as presented in the LLF Book, might be understood in terms of friendship.

The LLF Book presents the church’s longstanding understanding of marriage between one man and one woman as a gift of God in creation, for example (25), while recognising that for some this received doctrine is open for a development that affirms committed, same-sex relationships, including, among some, the

development of the doctrine of marriage to allow for same-sex marriage. Friends of Christ differ as to how to understand and receive the gifts of God. The disagreement can be so profound that some doubt whether the other is truly ‘a friend of Christ’.

In order to understand the nature of that disagreement, it is worth reflecting on how marriage, as presented in the LLF Book, might be understood in terms of friendship.

In the tradition and liturgy of the Church of England the gift of marriage is presented as a doorway into an exploration of what a disciplined life entails. When the LLF Book speaks of the gift of marriage, it speaks – again – of what was not chosen by us: Jesus, we are told, ‘rooted marriage in the characteristics of God’s gift of life in creation’ (17). Augustine’s account of the goods given in marriage resonate closely with the Church of England’s tradition and liturgy (26). Everyone is created, Augustine said, with the capacity for friendship. A marriage between one man and one woman represents ‘a true union of friendship’.<sup>10</sup> The Church of England has framed this friendship in its liturgy as the union of equals. There we read that marriage is ‘a gift of God in creation’ (25), reflecting the words of Jesus.

This gift of friendship-in-marriage is one which the Church’s liturgy celebrates with its emphasis on the ‘mutual society, help and comfort’ which marriage offers. With the gift of marriage, the first human friendship, comes the possibility of further gifts which overflow outwards beyond that friendship, in the gift of children and in the sign of Christ’s union with the church that marriage affords.

While marriage is a pattern of life in which grace upon grace is received, it is not the only such pattern. The LLF Book also describes celibacy as among ‘gifts of God’ which ‘can be lived to God’s glory as a form of abundant life’ (239). Some who are single ‘are able to affirm it as a gift of God, and as something they desire and – in some sense – choose. For others, singleness might be experienced more as something unchosen or involuntary.’ (240) ‘Their loss is real and painful. They call the church to shape its life in ways that allow the intimate love of God to be experienced more fully in the relationships of our common life’ (21). The LLF Book then invites friends to think about how what is unchosen may find strange purpose in the love of God,

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<sup>10</sup> Augustine, *De bono coniugali* 1.1.

how painful loss may find some remedy in the practice of the church of God, and how what is chosen amidst unchosen suffering may witness to the way of God.

In presenting the gift of life in marriage and celibacy in this way, the LLF Book bears witness to the liturgy and tradition of the Church of England. But it also recognises the profound and painful disagreements about marriage and celibacy that exist among the friends of Christ. Disagreements about what constitutes holy living in relationship highlight the diversity both of identity and theological perspective that exists among people, including within God's church, and is the fourth aspect of learning that the LLF Book invites us to explore.

## The gift of dignity and the significance of diversity

**'We can and must accept the equal dignity of all human beings and we can and must celebrate their God-given diversity.'** (199)

The fourth aspect of LLF's learning journey concerns the character and challenge of learning how to live a holy life amidst the diversity of the Church of England. The exhortation is to recognise the equal dignity of all: every human being is made in the image of God regardless of personal characteristics and is therefore to be respected and loved. However, we may disagree on whether all differences – all kinds of diversity – are good: some of our disagreements lead us to different judgements of what human dignity looks like. We disagree about what is right, proper and good, or, in other words, holy.

Learning how to live a holy life involves discernment amidst diversity, deliberation between alternative paths and decision-making. Such learning is, like other learning, dependent on

receiving 'the gift of life...in and through many kinds of relationships: ways of togetherness, with God, with each other, and with the whole created order' (38). The 'God-given' (41) Scriptures contain 'everything we need for salvation, for receiving the gift of abundant life together' (39-40). By the Scriptures and by the 'gift of reason' (41) God calls us to learn about the life which we are given and, by God's Spirit, to seek to agree and so enjoy together an abundant life in peace.

For God is one. There is one body, all sharing in one bread, Jesus Christ. Our desire is to be of one mind in sharing life, in finding, by the Spirit, the path of obedience to the One whom we are seeking. The invitation of the LLF process is to learn to navigate the different kinds of diversity among us so that, as Jesus' friends, we can seek Jesus so as to find him, to learn from him and so receive more fully the gift of life.

In receiving Christ as the definitive guide for our learning journey, we – amidst our diversity in theology or differences of identity relating to sexuality and gender – may seek and find unity. Jesus' friends' learning how to live a holy life must begin from 'learning to tell our own stories in relation to the story of Jesus' (206): Jesus, who was with God in the beginning, through whom all things came into being, and who is, 'the perfect image of God... living out God's nature and purpose in the world' (191), bringing fulfilment to all the many forms of togetherness for which we are purposed.

In this search to learn the unity in holiness which God gives, the LLF Book focuses minds, with appropriate sensitivity and starkness, on the question of 'whether certain aspects of human experience, in the area of gender and sexuality are to be viewed as reflecting the goodness and God-given diversity of humans as created in God's image, or as marks of the brokenness of that created image which God is working to restore' (217). In receiving the gift of Christ and, through Christ, the fulfilment of God's gifts in creation, relational togetherness and communion

**Friends cannot walk by on the other side of the road and avoid difficult and contested questions.**

in the Church where God has placed us – we are invited into a community of discernment. Friends cannot walk by on the other side of the road and avoid difficult and contested questions.

Friendship exists amidst a real and deep disagreement about what is life-giving and what is not life-giving – what is God-given and what is not God-given –

in the life of the body of Christ: in ‘the stories of bodies, relationships of networks

and communities, and of people whose lives are lived in relation to God’ (202).

As a body of Jesus’ friends, the Church of England witnesses in these stories ‘deep patterns of feeling and experience’ (200).

The LLF Book invites Jesus’ friends to discern how such stories and patterns should be related to what is given in the story of Christ and in the ‘God-given ordering of creation’ (214). Learning

how to live a holy life is the vocation required of the Church. Such learning requires Jesus’ friends to discern the range of

God’s good gifts of human diversity as they read the Scriptures together, with the illumination of the Spirit, and thereby discern the one body of Christ. So, in concluding this chapter, we turn

to the one defining gift that holds us together in communion: the gift of Christ.

## The gift of Christ

God’s gift to us is Christ. Our identity is found in Christ, the incarnate Son of the Father who, by the Holy Spirit, draws us into a communion of friendship with the Father and with everyone with whom Christ has communion – a communion which the friends themselves have not chosen and have no control over.

The disagreements among those who confess Christ – who understand themselves as friends of Christ – require a ‘patient

endurance' and a 'bearing with one another in love' (Ephesians 4.2). Being befriended by Christ, the Father's gift to humanity, means that Christ is the decisive criterion for what living a holy life means in practice: how Christ's friends are to live in love and faith, as they walk with him together while talking with each other on the road.

**'Jesus gave himself to others...It is in Jesus that our creation for relationship, fellowship and communion with others comes to fulfilment.'** (21)

Life, in the form of a communion of love, is, then, decisively fulfilled in Jesus. God desires a people to be with Jesus as his friends. And so Jesus asks his followers about their desires: 'What are you looking for?' Jesus himself holds the key to the friends' learning journey.

Jesus' gift of himself could not guide our steps away from the relationships given in and with the life of creation that was brought into being by the Word. Rather Jesus shows us the path deeper into those relationships. Jesus speaks of the patterns of life in terms of what was the case in the beginning. Jesus speaks of himself as the vine and of his friends as the branches, making fruitful and bringing to fulfilment the gift of life in them and through them. As the vine, Jesus is the answer to his disciples' desires, bringing them into the ordered life of one organic union, under the tender, nurturing care of his Father, the gardener (John 15).

United in friendship with God through Christ, the church is called to combine her understanding that in 'creating humanity, God is giving a particular and most precious gift to the world: the divine image' (189) with the revelation that 'Jesus is the perfect image of God...His entire life is a gift given to the world, living out God's nature and purpose in the world' (191). It is by the revelation of Jesus, and by the life of Jesus, that the gifts that creaturely learners desire – relationship, fellowship and communion – are received and inhabited. That communion finds

sacramental form in the eucharistic celebration as the gift of Christ is received by the friends of Christ. As the sacramental bread and wine are shared, the body is built up and the people's imagination is inspired for life in the kingdom of God. Just as friendship with Christ is unchosen by us, just so the sacrament of communion is given to us.

This communion of humanity with God depends on the communion of the Son with the Father, as Chapter 3 noted, reflecting on John 15.12-17. In John 17.6-8, Jesus extends the thought in his prayer for his followers:

**I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you, for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you, and they have believed that you sent me.**

**John 17.6-8**

These words speak of the revelation of the Father to those who were given to the Son. They speak of the recognition by the disciples that the gifts of the Son were from the Father. They tell of the giving of the words given by the Father to the Son, who is received and believed by the disciples, the friends learning together. The risen Jesus asks again 'Whom are you seeking?' and is recognised by Mary as 'Rabbouni', as teacher, the one who gives the words of God (John 20.15-16).

As the revealed Son of God, Jesus inaugurates 'a new community of friendship as people, very different people, gather around the same teacher and learn to love each other as he loves them' (15). Jesus, the one teacher of very different people offers loving fulfilment to all creaturely relationships, held together and fulfilled in him. Jesus' standing as the teacher of the words of God focuses the church's mind on the calling, responsibility and task

to understand God's gifts in the very way they are taught by and fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus himself, as we have said, is the core criterion for discerning the way ahead. For only in him may the church's calling to communicate the life of God with others be fulfilled. Only if we love God the giver in the way we have learnt to receive God's gifts, can we communicate those gifts in a manner which witnesses to the teacher.

Jesus himself  
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discerning  
the way  
ahead.

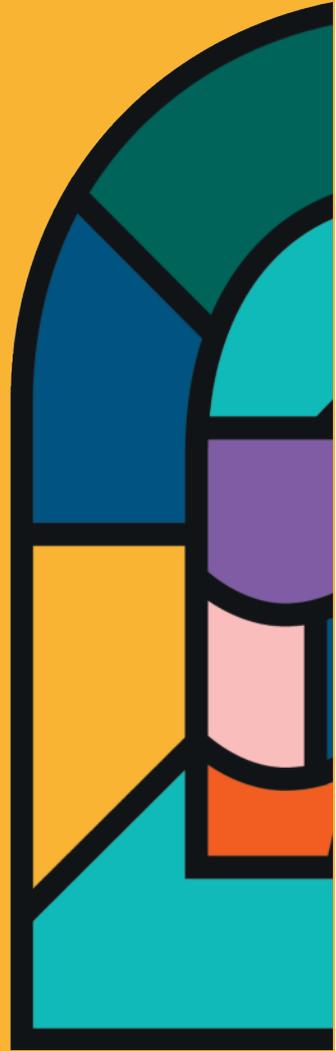
To think on God's gifts, therefore, focusses the church's attention on Jesus Christ, the single, authoritative teacher. Jesus shows how his disciples are to receive the gifts, the words and the name which they have been given as his friends. Through Christ, the Father nurtures a disciplined life in which friends may learn – may reflect, deliberate and decide. Because of their friendship with Christ, the church is not free to follow whomsoever it chooses but is bound to follow only the Word given by God in and through Jesus. It is in following Jesus, who holds everything together, that our creation for communion, fellowship, togetherness with others and with God can be fulfilled.

The goal of friendship with Christ is communion: with God, and, by God's mission in the world, with all those called to be friends of Christ, led by the Spirit into the holy life of God. How can we learn to share the gifts we have been given in a common life, in love and in faith, as the Church called to be a holy people, and so participate in the life and mission of God, showing true friendship to the world?

The final chapter invites us to consider how our reflections on friendship and gift might offer some insights into how we might go about discerning ways forward within the realities of disagreement in our life together as a Church.

**CHAPTER 5**

Friendship and  
the Gift of Life  
in Love and Faith



In Chapters 2 and 3 our focus was on friendship: friendship in the way that it is and has been understood in society and in the church, and the gift of friendship that Jesus bestows on us, his followers. We have seen how the friendship to which Jesus calls us is distinctive and even counter-cultural. We have also seen that friendships are not without tension or fracture, but that as friends of Jesus we are held together by Christ. While understanding friendship as a God-given gift heightens the stakes of the tensions and disagreements among us, being friends-in-Christ also opens up the possibility of creating a space for disagreement, perhaps even deepening friendship as we patiently work at those disagreements, together seeking the unity in truth that is God's gift to us in God's life. In Chapter 4 we explored the theme of gift: God's gifts of learning, life, relationships, marriage, celibacy and dignity as presented in the LLF Book, and we began to touch on the question of disagreements among God's friends brought together in Jesus Christ – the gift that holds all things together in true faith and love.

We now come back full circle and offer some reflections about the context in which this conversation is being held: the array of changes that the Church of England has already embarked upon and the discernment that has begun about a way forward in relation to questions of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. We return also to the idea of gift. How does this shape our relationships within the church? How does it help us understand our life together as Christ's people? How does it help us to engage with disagreement and to discern ways forward?

## Understanding each other as gift

The friendships that we have in Christ are a gift: we do not seek these friends – rather they are given to us by Christ himself. Just as a gift reminds us of the one who gave it, so our friends are a

living reminder of Jesus who 'stands between us' as we saw in Chapter 3. It is this reality that prompts Jesus to tell his disciples that 'everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another' (John 13.35). Our friendship and love for one another proclaim the reality and power of God's love among us. Our friendship in Jesus is a sign of the kingdom, the new creation.

This reality calls us to look for Christ in one other. It involves actively resisting the temptation to look for my own projection of Christ in the other – rather than seeking the living Christ himself in people who may be very different from us. It is, after all, when the disciples talk among themselves seemingly out of Jesus' earshot, they end up arguing about who is the greatest (Mark 9.34). It is when, struggling to understand what Jesus is talking about, they jump to the wrong conclusions among themselves about having forgotten to bring bread (Matthew 16.7). It is when they think Jesus is asleep and uncaring that they succumb to panic and fear (Mark 4.38).

Are we having our discussions among ourselves, out of Jesus' earshot, as it were?

As we, friends of Jesus in the Church of England, wrestle with disagreements about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage – as well as the many changes which we are undergoing as a Church – are we doing this together with Jesus who stands among and between us? Or are we having our discussions among ourselves, out of his earshot, as it were?

We saw in Chapter 3 that just as we did not choose Jesus – he chose us – so we do not choose Jesus' friends: Jesus chooses them and gives them to us. In fact, Jesus had a habit of gathering friends around him who would have gone to some lengths to avoid each other out of fear or prejudice, and with whom meal fellowship would have been challenging: pharisees and tax

collectors, scribes and prostitutes, for example. This is countercultural: we befriend one another because we have been called together by Jesus – not (primarily) because we have shared interests or opinions; not because we are from the same ethnic or cultural or socioeconomic background; not even because we share the same values or goals or because we like each other. We saw in Chapter 4 that this gift of friendship is part of the overriding gift of life in relationship which came into being through Christ and in which God is always the initiator.

That said, it is by God's grace that, as we engage with one another, we are drawn into deeper relationships of mutual affection, commitment and love for one another by the Spirit of Christ who is at work within and among us. We find that our one shared calling as followers of and witnesses to Jesus deepens and we may even learn that we need the friends we weren't looking for in order to discover the abundance of our new life in Christ.

But this does not just happen. It means sharing life together, learning together, eating together, praying together, serving together – much as those first friends of Jesus did. It calls us to see each other as whole people created in God's image. When we start sharing our lives in this way, we are better able to resist the temptation to reduce the person to a 'single issue' straw person – that person with whom I disagree about x and who believes y. Perhaps this is something of what many discovered when they engaged with LLF together and found that they were drawn closer together in their church community or across church communities.

Might we be called to deeper and more holistic relationships with one another in our church communities? Might an enriched sharing of our lives create the space for disagreements and diversity to become means of grace – means of being drawn closer together into Christ, deeper into the truth of who he is and who we are? Might it be that as we do so, we learn to discern together the ways of life which are life-giving and those which are

Might we be called to deeper and more holistic relationships with one another in our church communities?

not, even amidst all the ambiguities? We need to tread carefully, though: the call to closer and deeper relationships may ring alarm bells of harm and even trauma for some, which is why we need to turn to the problem of pain.

## The problem of pain and the gift of grace

Of course, this is not easy. 'Life together', when it becomes a goal or an idol, self-destructs. We are entirely dependent upon the 'grace upon grace' (John 1.16) that we have received in Christ. This grace operates in weakness and frailty and in our equal status as God's forgiven sinners and beloved failures. It requires us to be alert to the ways in which we cause each other pain and to be open to learning how disagreement impacts people in different and often unequal ways, sometimes causing harm.

To relate to another person, particularly one who is very different, is always going to be a risky undertaking, and the history of humanity suggests that harm will occur at times. Making space for the reality of pain and finding ways to relate across it, is to embody a call to reconciliation, and an essential aspect of the call to be Jesus' friends. This, however, does not make harm either inevitable, or something that should be minimised or brushed aside. We also need to acknowledge the asymmetric nature of harm caused in this area.

When we discuss matters of sexual orientation and gender identity, this question of 'harm' is often raised, both as a past and present reality, and as a fear for future encounters. As friends of Jesus, commanded to love one another, the reality that we cause pain and even harm to one another is deeply distressing, and a sign of our individual and collective sinfulness. A part of the LLF

process has been to listen intently to the voices of LGBTQ+ Christians and recognise the role that the church in all its forms, and the Church of England in particular, has played in their marginalisation, and at times, in causing deep psychological harm.

However, to talk of harm is complex within the framework of the church. First, there is disagreement about what 'harm' looks like. For those holding more traditional positions, moral and spiritual harm can be caused by blessing or agreeing to patterns of life that contradict the holy life to which the gospel calls us. Hence, from this perspective, to disagree with someone's expression of their identity is not inherently harmful, but a loving, responsible and truly friendly response, especially when viewed through the lens of eternity.

On the other hand, there are many life stories of LGBTQ+ Christians that speak of deep harm through coercive practices, sometimes in pastoral prayer, sometimes through forms of 'conversion therapy', sometimes through systematic exclusion and through a more subtle undermining of someone's sense of self and personhood through consistent condemnation and a refusal to acknowledge their life with God. To disagree in the area of sexual orientation and gender identity is not simply an intellectual matter, or a question of actions, but touches on a person's sense of self. We need to recognise when, even with good intentions, the church has at times crossed a line into deeply harmful and traumatic practices that shatter someone's sense of self and ability to inhabit the world safely.

When we speak of our calling to be the people of God together, this leaves us with deep uncertainty and complex questions. We are called to be the church, and to be one. The abundant life that Jesus promises is not a life free of pain – as Jesus' words, 'take up your cross and follow me', suggest.

If we are called to be one, as a church, how do we deal with the reality of 'harm' graciously and firmly? How do we develop

healthier ways of being church, without separating into homogenous bubbles? What do we do when we disagree on the very definition of 'harm' and how it is caused?

While pain and even harm do not necessarily result in trauma, in the clinical sense of the word, when harm does cause trauma, injunctions to keep living together, to love one another regardless become deeply problematic. If someone suffers trauma, they need compassion and safety above all else. That is why a traumatised person may need to withdraw from certain relationships or communities while they heal and find a safe place from which to rebuild strength and identity, and it is the church's duty to enable them to do so.

Yet the church is not just individuals. As entire communities, as a body, making safe spaces for individuals does not take away the need to relate to one another and continue exploring what it means to be friends of Jesus, called to be friends with each other too. The wider community of believers needs to carry the burden that individuals should not bear alone.

## The problem with power and the gift of the Spirit

Thinking back to our 'ordinary' friendships, no doubt we have disagreements between us, and we have hopes that our friend might change in a particular view or habit. Sometimes we might talk about these. Sometimes our hopes may be unspoken. This is natural and to be expected: we want the very best for our friend.

When it comes to our friendship with followers of Jesus, these longings may be very deeply held and integral with our understanding of truth about God. In relation to questions of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage, for example, they may be about the holy way of life to which God calls us. They may be about wanting our friend – and indeed the church, the

body of Christ – to be saved from spiritual, or even eternal harm by following the ways of holiness to which we believe Christians are called.

Because Jesus stands between us and holds us together, we can place these longings for our friend to change in Jesus' hands. We can trust the living Spirit of Christ to be at work as we obey Christ's command to love one another. In so doing we create space for the Spirit to be doing the work of conviction and fruit-bearing that Jesus promised his followers.

In our disagreements, therefore, how do we avoid usurping a power that belongs only to God, while at the same time discerning the work of the Spirit in convicting and fruit-bearing, never forgetting the gift of one another's friendship with Jesus Christ in the Spirit?

## The call to be church and the gift of sanctification

As friends of Jesus, we are called to keep attending to one another in the fullness of our humanity, not reducing one another to features of our identity or belief. This is one reason why we cannot say, 'I do not need you'. This body with its many members is both a mystical body that reaches across time and space, as well as a physical meeting of real bodies sharing real bread and wine together. The Body of Christ needs all its members, even if, at times, some members struggle to relate to one another and may even need to say, 'We need to withdraw for a while'. This does not negate the personhood or value of the other; nor does it deny their relationship to Jesus.

The call to be friends of Jesus is a call to try and keep walking together, to speak well of one another, to recognise the fullness of the other, to be generous in our behaviour, our words and assumptions, both individually and corporately. Even more

This call to mutual love makes deep demands on us in seeking the temporal and eternal welfare of the one who is profoundly different yet connected through our common Saviour.

than anything, it is a call to mutual love – and this call makes deep demands on us in seeking the temporal and eternal welfare of the one who is profoundly different yet connected through our common Saviour.

Might it be, therefore, that the very discomfort and chafing of having to get along despite disagreements and the pain we inflict on one another is one of the means by which we 'are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to

another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit' (2 Corinthians 3.18)? Might it be that to walk away or distance ourselves from each other is to miss this means of sanctification? Might it be that succumbing to the temptation of retreating into our echo chambers is also a retreat from the abundant life which Christ offers?

Of course, the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work in many other ways in the life of discipleship, not least through the reading of Scripture and obedience to the living Christ we find in its pages. Nevertheless, as we turn to the Johannine epistles, we read about the sanctifying power of obeying Jesus' command to love one another: 'if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us' (1 John 4.12).

## The gift of communion

In Chapter 1 we began by describing the church as a living body – the body of Christ, given to God's people. It is a gift that draws every believer into the life of Christ by means of the Spirit and

into love for one another by means of the love with which God first loved us. In his first letter, John repeatedly shows how the marks of union with Christ are inextricably intertwined. These marks are the confession of Christ as Lord and Saviour<sup>11</sup> and obedience to God's command to love one another.<sup>12</sup> These dual commitments were what sustained the life of John's community through its tensions and maintained its unity in the face of everything that might have forced it apart.

We see this in John's Gospel too, perhaps most graphically in the image of the vine (John 15). The followers of Jesus are those who abide in the true vine and therefore in whom the words of Jesus abide, bearing much fruit. This bearing of fruit is a mark of discipleship and brings glory to God the Father and joy to the community of Jesus' friends (John 15.8-11). Might it also be that it is this fruit that makes it possible for the unlikely community of the friends of Jesus to love one another and to lay down their lives for one another?

**Might it also be that it is this fruit that makes it possible for this unlikely community of the friends of Jesus to love one another and to lay down their lives for one another?**

We can discard a gift we don't need or don't like. Doing so probably says something about the relationship between the one who gave and the one who received the gift: it's likely that they didn't know each other well enough to know what the other needed or desired. When it comes to the gift of communion – of being the church – we are not free to discard the gift of one

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<sup>11</sup> 1 John 2.21-23; 3.23-24; 4.2-3, 14-16; 5.10.

<sup>12</sup> 1 John 2.10; 3.10, 11, 14, 16, 23; 4.7, 11-12, 20-21.

to the other because we together receive and are the gift of Jesus' body: 'this is my body, given for you'. We are that body and it is given to us by the One who knows us – individually and collectively – better than we know ourselves.

As the body of Christ, our call is to bear witness to the Christ who is our head, drawing us into the reality of *holy communion* in the midst of our frailty, friction and confusion – communion with one another and with God.

This is a communion that turns weaknesses into opportunities and disagreements into creative possibilities. It is a communion that makes it possible for those who suspect each other of rejecting Christ's friendship to become friends in the fellowship of Christ, living together a faithful, penitent, holy life. It is a communion of the friends of Jesus who confess Christ together, bear with one another in love and seek the mind of Christ.

It is a communion that is held together through mutual service in the pattern of Jesus who washed his disciples' feet. It is a communion that is oiled by the fruits of the Spirit that grow by abiding in the vine: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control. It is a communion that points the world to God's future as a sign and servant of the new creation, manifesting its life in the present.



## Suggestions for further reading

### Friendship

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Thompson, John B., *Sharing Friendship: Exploring Anglican Character, Vocation, Witness and Mission*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2015.

## LLF Papers

These papers are available in the LLF online library:  
(<https://llf.churchofengland.org/login/index.php>)

Andy Angel, *An Exploration of Covenanted Friendship and the Gospel of John*.

Pete Wilcox, *Covenanted Fidelity*.

Jeremy Worthen, *Testing the Church*.