

Lord God,
you have taught us
that anything we do without love is worth nothing,
for whoever lives without love
is counted dead before you;
send your Holy Spirit,
and pour into our hearts
that most excellent gift of love,
the true bond of peace and of all virtues;
grant this for the sake of your Son Jesus Christ
who is alive with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God now and for ever.

Amen.

On the 16th of February six years ago, the Archbishops wrote:

“How we deal with [...] real and profound disagreement [...] is the challenge we face as people who all belong to Christ.

To deal with [...] disagreement and to find ways forward, we need a radical new Christian inclusion in the Church. This must be founded in Scripture, in reason, in tradition, in theology and the Christian faith as the Church of England has received it; it must be based on good, healthy, flourishing relationships, and in a proper 21st century understanding of being human and of being sexual.

We need to work together – not just the bishops but the whole Church, not excluding anyone – to move forward with confidence.

The way forward needs to be about love, joy and celebration of our common humanity; of our creation in the image of God, of our belonging to Christ – all of us, without exception, without exclusion.”

Some of you will remember that letter – and the moment at the February General Synod that prompted it. Some of you will remember – and may even have

participated in – the Shared Conversations that preceded it. Others of you may belong to the “LLF generation”, only having entered these debates more recently, perhaps by participating in *Living in Love and Faith* in some way.

Real and profound disagreement continues to characterise the Church of England. Disagreement about sexuality persists *within* our church communities, *between* our churches, *among* clergy and lay leaders, as well as among us bishops, and now here, among members of Synod.

It is not, of course, the **only** reality about our church. But these particular disagreements mar our life together, tarnish our reputation in the world we are called to serve and distract from God’s mission. They are a source of discouragement and doubt for us in the Church, dragging us away from the “love, joy and celebration of our common humanity” that the gospel calls us to; they cast a shadow over our witness to Christ, the good news of salvation and redemption that we long to embody and declare.

As bishops, we have received countless passionate and forcefully articulated letters and emails expressing seemingly opposing views in the name of Christ. Many blogs and even some books have been written since 2017, persuasively setting out arguments that lead to different conclusions.

On Wednesday we will witness passionate debate and clearly articulated arguments again – as those of us who were here six years ago did.

In response to the proposals set out in the Archbishops’ letter of February 2017, a whole suite of LLF resources was produced, including a large book, sixteen podcasts and a video course. An online library has been stocked with different perspectives on questions of human identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage (including the deep study of scripture and theological reflection). Individuals have shared their stories of struggle and redemption, stories of God’s powerful presence in seemingly contradictory paths of discipleship.

Our call is and always will be to seek the face of Christ – yes, in each other, but above all in searching the Scriptures, examining the Church’s tradition, and exercising our reason as we strive to make sense of how truth is to be lived out with grace in our 21st century context.

The reality is that as we have done all these things – even among ourselves as bishops – our conclusions about the ‘clear teaching of Scripture’ and the trajectory of the Church’s tradition diverge. We see God at work in each other’s ministries and are forced to acknowledge that somehow, mysteriously, the people of God who seek God’s face and who want to see the Church flourish, disagree.

For some unfathomable reason, God, it seems, has allowed us to continue to disagree – disappointingly refusing to engineer a Damascus road experience for one side or the other, either in the Church of England or across the Anglican Communion.

How can this be?

Perhaps we are all prone to forget that all of us – without exception – “see in a mirror dimly... know only in part”. As confident as we might be that we have heard God’s “answer”, perhaps God is calling us to be humbler – humbler towards one another but, above all, humbler in our humanity towards the God who is above and beyond our understanding and whose love is deeper, higher and wider than we can imagine. Perhaps we need to be reminded not just of the nearness of God but of God’s wholly ‘otherness’.

So if, as it seems, God is calling us to *live* with our disagreements, how can we do so without causing each other so much pain and bringing the Church into humiliating disrepute? How can we cease to stand in judgment over one another? But most importantly of all, how can we stop adding to the sufferings of Christ, the one who, “opening his arms wide on the cross”, holds us together in his costly embrace?

In their letter in 2017 the Archbishops wrote that “We need to work together – not just the bishops but the whole Church, not excluding anyone – to move forward with confidence”.

Over the last few years we have tried to do just that – urging church communities across our dioceses to engage with the LLF resources together.

In gathering the reflections and experiences of the thousands who accepted this invitation to learn together, to listen to one another and to God, we hear the stridently confident voices about divergent ways forward: ‘stand fast against prevailing culture. Stay true to the clear teaching of Scripture’, on the one hand,

and, on the other, we see another understanding of Scripture: ‘the Church of England needs to catch up and allow equal marriage’.

But underneath the more strident voices, we can pick out a different tune...

relationships strengthened as silence was broken;

growing empathy and respect as different perspectives were shared and better understood;

not allowing the discomfort of our differences to distance ourselves from each other;

and, importantly, allowing our hearts and minds to be opened to the pain that we have inflicted on each other; owning up to the sin of homophobia, transphobia or biphobia, as well as to our intolerance of perspectives different from our own.

We have seen groups being helped to create spaces that are both safer and braver than they have been before. We have seen a growing awareness of the significance of the process, and not just the outcome.

The church has begun to change.

It has begun to change the way it does things. I believe we are now more aware of the need to include as many voices as possible in our deliberations, to listen to the Spirit speaking through the *whole* church, in all its diversity.

And as we have done so, we have realised how rich and transformative such conversations can be.

But we have also realised just how badly we have treated LGBTI+ people. Just how inhumanely we have excluded and rejected people who are not like us. Our eyes have been opened to the harm that we have done, especially to LGBTI+ people. **That is a reality that must continue to change.**

Finding ways to walk together with our diversity and differences is not comfortable.

The Archbishops warned us about this in their Preface to the LLF Book:

This book will be deeply uncomfortable in different places for everyone who reads it sincerely and honestly. It will bring you face to face [...] with Christian people who have been hurt or harmed by the words and actions

of the Church. It will confront each of us with the realities of the depth and breadth of disagreement [...]. It will remind us of the depth of commitment to holiness that the gospel and the cross call us to, and how short all of us fall from it. We must not pretend otherwise. Only in looking honestly at the fact that we have sisters and brothers in Christ who have vehemently opposed views to ours, can we come in humility before God and seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

As bishops we have been seeking the mind of Christ in the uncomfortably sharp disagreements that we have about same-sex relationships. In our deliberations we have come to realise that each of us brings something to the table that enlarges our understanding of God and of the holiness to which we are called.

To separate, to walk apart would impoverish the Church of England. The costlier and more narrow way is to walk together, to bear with one another, to suffer the discomfort of our diversity and difference within the body of Christ. To suffer being misunderstood and perhaps even reviled for refusing to say to a fellow follower of Christ – “I don’t need you”.

Alongside our engagement with LLF as bishops, and our discernment about walking together, we have come to understand more clearly the situation we find ourselves in with regard to marriage in the Church of England.

The Equal Marriage Act introduced – for the first time – marriage as an option for same-sex couples. Since 2014, same-sex couples have been able to contract a civil marriage, recognised in law. But the legislation permitting this also explicitly excluded the possibility of a same-sex marriage being conducted according to the rites and ceremonies of the Church of England.

This situation is seen as patently unjust by many. For others, it – and the Church of England exemption under the act – is a necessary consequence of the Church’s unchanging understanding of holy matrimony.

This disagreement aside, it also raises the question about a distinction between civil marriage and holy matrimony, regardless of the genders of the couple concerned. Opposite sex couples who have been civilly married are understood as being

married in the sight of God and of the Church. There is no question of renegeing on the validity of that understanding.

But how does this apply now, when same-sex couples in a civil marriage are not considered to have entered a state holy matrimony? Furthermore, civil marriage ceremonies encompass many options, some of which accord with marriage as the Church understands it – with vows of fidelity and permanence – and others which do not include such promises.

This, alongside the changed meaning of civil marriage as a result of the Equal Marriage Act, raises complex questions which, it could be argued, the Church should have asked back in 2013, but which we are perhaps better placed to ask now with the benefit of the LLF process. As bishops we are not offering a definitive answer to these questions, but we are aware that they have been raised and some fresh thinking may be needed.

In proposing our way forward as bishops, what we have done is chart a path that navigates the realities of the disagreements among us in a way that enables us to walk together – acknowledging its discomfort and ensuring that individual conscience is protected.

One way of describing this way forward is to see ourselves standing in different places – and finding a point that each of us, by stretching out our arm, can touch and reach the fingertips of the other. It will be uncomfortable for everyone, but it is about creating a space for the Holy Spirit to move among us and to continue to guide us and shape us into the likeness of Christ.

How have we – the College of Bishops – tried to do this?

First, we have acknowledged that we do not agree about the nature of holy matrimony. We do not agree whether the biblical and theological understanding of marriage can be extended to same-sex couples. That is why we have not forced such a change on the Church of England.

Second, we have acknowledged and recognise the *urgent necessity for pastoral change* in welcoming and celebrating the Christian virtues of faithfulness, mutual love and lifelong commitment of so many same-sex couples in our churches and in wider society. That is what the *Prayers of Love and Faith* aim to enable.

They do so without changing the Church's doctrine of holy matrimony. That is because they do not set the couple's relationship in the context of a biblical and theological understanding of marriage and they do not use any of the liturgical material of the Church of England's authorised services of marriage.

Third, we have come to a deeper understanding of 'blessing' in our liturgical practice and prayers. We recognise that it is God's blessing we are asking for in our praying. And God's blessing is an expression of God's desire to see people flourish. It is not a statement of approval, but of God's lavish love which we are commanded to channel equally lavishly.

Fourth, we recognise that there is a spectrum of convictions among us bishops and across the Church. That is why the *Prayers of Love and Faith* are commended – they are not imposed on anyone. They simply form part of the variations that are permitted for use in either a Service of the Word or of Holy Communion. Furthermore, the range of *Prayers* offered reflects the range of convictions among us, so that clergy may use the prayers to create a service that they are glad to perform in line with their conscience and the wishes of the two people concerned.

Fifth, we realise that the voluntary nature of using these *Prayers* – while allowing clergy to make decisions and order the life of their congregations in accordance with their conscience – also brings with it the fear of what repercussions there might be for making such decisions.

We know that clear reassurances will need to be provided for those who choose to use the *Prayers* and for those who choose not to use them. This is about how we relate well to one another across our church communities. This also why we need to continue to engage with the *Pastoral Principles* as we witness to Christ in a polarised and fractured world.

Sixth, we know that our proposals have not made explicit statements about sexual intimacy in relation to the *Prayers of Love and Faith* or, to the civil marriages, civil partnerships or covenanted friendships that couples have entered into. We know that there is disagreement about these matters. This work will need to be done as part of producing the *Pastoral Guidance*.

And **finally**, we are also aware that we have not spelled out the implications of this way forward regarding the distinction that currently exists for clergy and lay leaders

in same-sex civil marriages or civil partnerships. This work, too, will need to be done in relation to producing the *Pastoral Guidance*.

The *Living in Love and Faith* resources are about much more than same-sex relationships. They are about our Christian understanding of what it means to be human in the light of social, scientific, cultural and political change.

There are some questions which are being hotly and acrimoniously debated in society today. These are questions surrounding our embodied existence – with respect to gender identity, for example, or, in a different area, our interaction with virtual reality and advances in Artificial Intelligence.

There are other questions which may not feature in the headlines but to which we believe we should be more alert in the light of our identity in Christ as individuals and as a church.

In an increasingly permissive society, the Church needs to uphold and celebrate the Christian vision and inherent goodness of faithful and permanent relationships in both marriage and other committed relationships between two people. We need to become better at offering pastoral support for families and households that reflects the unconditional love of God, and that is for the good of the people involved and for the good of society.

Valuing singleness, friendship, and commitment to community are areas that many have raised and that the Church needs pay attention to. The church's commitment to 'valuing all God's children' in schools needs to be updated, and we need to be clear about how the Church's stand against all forms of coercion – whether in relation to so-called 'conversion therapies' or other forms of abuse – is worked out in practice.

These are areas to which we believe the Church needs to attend. While we have not yet created a road map for each of these, we are hopeful that what we have discovered through *Living in Love and Faith* about how to learn together, to listen to each other and to God, will characterise these vital areas of work too.

Living in Love and Faith has been about inclusion. The invitation to engage with the resources, with each other and with God has gone far and wide. I am encouraged that so many took part and that so many shared their reflections and convictions.

These responses – set out in the *Listening with Love and Faith* report – have been an important part of our discernment of what we believe God is saying to the Church.

As you know, Synod members have engaged with *Living in Love and Faith* at almost every session since 2017. Your engagement has been instrumental in shaping the work. Your participation in these Sessions of Synod is no different: as bishops, we are eager to listen to you as together we shape the way forward over the coming months.

Tomorrow you will have an opportunity to do this in the group work. And, as you know, on Wednesday there will be ample opportunity to debate the motion we have put before you.

My hope is that at this Synod you will embrace your role as leaders in the Church of England.

I hope that we will not just ‘look to your own interests, but to the interests of others.’

I hope that we will embrace the ‘narrow way’ of walking together, rather than the wide way of retreating into the comfort of our silos.

I hope that our passion to avoid some sins will not blind us to the sins of ‘strife, quarrels, dissensions and factions’ that St Paul warns us against.

I hope that we will carry and own the reality of our disagreements on our heart alongside Jesus’ prayer that ‘we may be one’ in his love and care.

I hope that we will commit to living well as a church, loving, valuing and cherishing every person.

May God hold us in the redeeming love of Christ and bless us with the guiding presence of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.