

A Briefing paper on THE RESPONSE FROM THE BISHOPS OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND FOLLOWING LIVING IN LOVE AND FAITH

At the next session of the General Synod (the Church of England's national 'parliament') from 6th – 9th February the submission by the House of Bishops will be hotly debated but unless the Bishops decide to backtrack or modify what they are proposing as a result of the debate, PCCs and their Incumbents (vicars) of parishes like St James' by the Park will need to come to their own decision about whether they are willing for the commended prayers to be used and in what contexts.

At first sight what is being proposed seems a rather modest step after 5 years of consultation and a significant number of people inside and outside of the church calling for a complete change in the Church of England's current doctrine of marriage.

In short, the bishops' proposal has three components:

1. An apology to LGBTQI+ people *"expressing their grief and apologising for the way that many of them have been treated by the Church, causing pain and harm"*.
2. The statement that there will be no change in the doctrine of marriage. *"The Church of England continues to hold the received understanding of Holy Matrimony as between one man and one woman, as set forth in its canons and authorised liturgies"*.
3. The Bishops are commending prayers for couples under the heading Prayers of Love and Faith on the basis that the Bishops recognise the diversity of committed relationships that exist both in the Church and in wider society today and so *"joyfully affirm, and want to acknowledge in church, stable, committed relationships between two people – including same-sex relationships"*. The proposal goes on to state that *"these prayers could be used in a variety of ways: to dedicate and give thanks for a couple, to dedicate and pray for God's blessing on a couple, or to celebrate a covenanted friendship. They might be used for two people who have marked a significant stage in the development of their relationship, formed a covenanted friendship, registered a civil partnership, or entered into a civil marriage"*. Later on in the document there is a clear statement that *"the use of these prayers will be entirely discretionary: clergy may choose to use some combination of these prayers or not to use them at all"*.

Within General Synod there are likely to be a whole range of reactions to this proposal which is acknowledged in the document mirroring the diversity of opinion within the House of Bishops who themselves don't agree on these matters. However, Dan has invited me to share my personal reflections on this proposal while recognising that others within St James by the Park who I consider close Christian friends hold to different opinion.

As I said at the start of this briefing note, at first sight this proposal represents a modest change to existing practice which affirms to some extent those who identify as LGBTQI+. However, in my opinion, if accepted and enacted in its current form, it will signal a major departure from current practice within the Church of England and the Christian tradition that dates back 2000 years. Why? Well firstly, because it appears to seriously downgrade Christian marriage, failing to adequately affirm and celebrate what has been central to a Christian understanding of sexuality, relationships and family life for centuries and recognised widely as a significant societal good. It does this by commending prayers of blessing for a whole variety of other relationships between two people so long as they are *"stable and committed"*. In addition, through its lack of clarity and its ambiguity, it effectively breaks the link between sexual intimacy and marriage. This is a fundamental departure

from the orthodox teaching of the Church which has maintained that sexual intimacy is intended to be within the context of Christian marriage.

In my opinion the traditional understanding the Church's teaching on marriage is good news for all people whether married or single recognising that all of us fall short of God's standards in all areas of our lives including our sexuality. If God is good and his work in creation was good, then by implication his provision of marriage between a man & a woman for life with sexual intimacy meant exclusively within that context must be good for individuals and society provided it is put alongside the wider relations and responsibilities within a Christian community functioning as the body of Christ.

As far as I am concerned the bishops' proposal fails to recognise that 21st century sexual ethics and understanding about gender, sexuality and relationships are shaped by expressive individualism which is to a large extent antithetical to the teaching of Jesus and the Christian understanding of God's revealed will and purposes in Scripture and from the mouth of Jesus in the Gospels. The document seems to accept 21st century sexual ethics and relationships as simply 'the way things are' and then seeks to offer a non-judgemental non-specific blessing of such relationships as though we have nothing more to say than stable and committed relationships are a good thing.

The bishops call for us to accept their proposal on the grounds of unity but if they do go ahead and commend the Prayers of Love and Faith, there is increasing likelihood that these modest changes will result in further fragmentation of the Anglican Communion with the Archbishop of Canterbury as its head.

In addition, I am very concerned that clergy with an orthodox Anglican understanding of marriage who are not willing on grounds of conviction to offer prayers for a same-sex couple are at risk of being on the receiving end of a significant backlash with a negative impact on their local community relations and mission and in time might even make it untenable for an individual minister to continue in their post.

The Archbishop of Canterbury has felt the need to state on record that he himself will not use these prayers for the sake of his wider role within the Anglican Communion. I have spoken to our bishops asking them both to consider whether they too might be prepared to go on record that they will not be using such prayers of blessing for the sake of unity within their Diocese and relations with their companion links across the Anglican Communion. If they feel able to do this, it will offer some additional support to orthodox clergy who are not willing to use these commended prayers.

Please pray for me and others from our Diocese who will be participating in the debate on the Bishops' proposal which will take place on the afternoon of Wednesday 8th February.

Simon Clift

Member of St James' By the Park and General Synod rep for Winchester Diocese.

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