LLF - introduction for Diocesan Synod – 30th November 2024

There is now a long history of CofE grappling with issues of sexuality going back well into the last century. You can go even further back to the first Lambeth Conference in 1867 when whether polygamy should be permitted for Christians in Natal was at the heart of its debates. That topic remained on the agenda of Lambeth Conferences for many years.

But in 1988 the Lambeth Conference called on all bishops in the Anglican Communion to undertake in the following decade a "deep and dispassionate study of the question of homosexuality". So our own HoB produced a document in 1991 entitled 'Issues in Human Sexuality'.

It has assumed a particular significance in the ongoing debate because at some stage and no one can now say when or on what authority it became part of the discernment process for ordination, as candidates are asked to confirm that they have read those Guidelines and that they are prepared to live within them.

Over the years since it was introduced that requirement has been challenged on a number of grounds, but I believe it is still a part of the discernment process.

The next document of significance was in 2013 – it is known as the Pilling report – because it came from a HoB working group chaired by Sir Joseph Pilling. In short that said that (i) people agreed that scripture was authoritative, but (ii) people disagreed about what scripture says about issues of homosexuality and that means that (iii) we should learn how to disagree about this through a series of shared conversations over a period of 2 years. Those conversations were organised and completed in July 2016. Some of us may remember taking part in them.

Following on the Shared Conversations, in 2017 the HoB produced a paper for GS. GS 2055 – 'Marriage and Same Sex Relationships after Shared Conversations'

In short it said:

> There was little support for changing the CoE teaching on marriage as set out in Canon B30.
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> But there was a strong sense that the existing resources, guidance and tone needed to be revisited – with some suggestions as to how that might be developed.

GS was asked to take note of that report – but that proposal to take note was rejected by the house of clergy in synod, and so it failed. It was rejected because it was widely regarded as not addressing but rather reinforcing homophobic attitudes.

The next step was that the ABC called for what he termed a "radical new inclusion" in the church. That raised the expectations of those hoping for a significant change in approach.

He said that the HoB would issue a bishops' teaching document. That morphed into the book and course known as 'Living in Love and Faith'. Some of you will have read it or dipped into it and/or taken part in the course.

Following on from that work, and further discussions in GS and in dioceses the next step was the publication of a set of prayers the Prayers of Love and Faith – PLF. It is a suite of prayers that can be used with same sex couples to pray God's blessing on them.

They have now been discussed and debated endlessly in GS – which is clearly sharply divided over the issue. To get a flavour of that – read pages 13 and 14 of DS 24/24 – minutes of last meeting in your pack with a report back from GS by two people with opposing views.

However where we are is that those prayers were commended for use by the HoB in October 2023, but in quite limited circumstances – ie they should only be used in the course of a regular service – which might be a service of the word or a eucharist.

In particular for parish churches that perhaps only have one or two services a week on a Sunday that was quite limiting – they cannot arrange an additional service eg on a Friday lunchtime or Saturday afternoon – a special service in which those prayers could be used. Such services have become known in the LLF jargon as "stand alone services".

Another issue that has emerged is what happens for those who disagree with their use and who may find themselves in disagreement with their bishop? And equally those who want to use them and are therefore also in a different place from their bishop.

As an ecclesiastical lawyer it seems to me that looking at this whole picture – we find that the Anglican Communion since at least 1988 has been addressing how it should make allowance for altered practice in relation to issues of marriage and sexuality. In such a place we are in the realms of what is known in western church law as dispensation or in eastern church law as economy. That is how the church without changing its laws permits variations from its laws to accommodate current situations.

We have an example of this in the remarriage of divorced people – it was as recently as 2002 that the Church agreed to allow the remarriage in church of those who had been divorced; and it provided a conscience clause for clergy who did not believe that should be permitted.

Also you may know that if someone wants to be ordained who is divorced or whose partner is divorced and the person from whom they are divorced is still living then they have to obtain a faculty from the archbishop –a faculty is literally a dispensation from complying with the requirements of the law. And interestingly at a recent synod we seem to have moved on so far in only 20 years from first allowing that that there was a desire now to remove the requirement for a faculty altogether. In fact the proposal was modified to revisit the manner of the application of Canon C4. However there are some who still hold to the strictest of positions – that it cannot be permitted for a remarried divorcee to be ordained and some who do not believe any true follower of Jesus can remarry if divorced, without committing sin. But until now the church has manage to continue together with those different views.

But some regard all these issues about marriage and sexuality as being a "first order matter", ie fundamental to our system of beliefs. In other words it is in the same category of teaching as the divinity of Jesus and so they argue that if someone says those prayers with a same sex couple – then – it is in the same category as if the person denied that Jesus was God, and consequently they cannot regard themselves as being any longer in communion with that person, and if a bishop allows it then they consider themselves out of communion with that bishop and if the bishop isn't defrocked some other episcopal provision must be made for them.

So given the nature of that division how do we move forward? You have in your packs a document "LLF next steps update Autumn 2024". (digital pages 55-59)

It tells you that there have been some working groups set up to address those questions – some of our York GS reps are a part of one of those groups. Those groups are working on four areas. There was a press release about this on 22nd November – it is available on line under CoE Press releases – it tells you about the work of each group and its membership.

> One group is looking at the prayers themselves and their use in stand alone services – how does a church decide whether they will use them – should there be a registration process? And if so how should it operate, what discussions should take place in parishes etc – Adam Gaunt, Neil Burgess, Nick Land and Sammi Tooze are all on that group.
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> A second groups is looking at how the conscience of ministers who consider themselves to be no longer in communion with their bishop can be protected and yet still remain under an episcopal authority they will recognise – "Pastoral Reassurance".
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> Thirdly, what will be the way forward – in terms of assessment of any experimental period – and what will be the route to reaching final decisions – so there is a group about a future "Bishops' Statement".
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> Finally there is a group looking at the future of clergy and ordinands who are in same sex relationships and the issue of whether they can enter into a civil marriage. Everyone appears to agree that Issues in Human Sexuality from 1991 should be replaced, but with what? "Vocations and Ministry Guidance" is the name of that group.

Work on those issues will it is hoped be completed and presented to GS next February. Exactly what the question for GS will be remains to be seen. But the expectation/hope/fear depending, where you are in relation to it all, is that following on during 2025 there should be a period when some churches will start to use the prayers and more widely than in a existing regular service; some form of alternative episcopal provision will be made available; and there will be discussion about it all in Diocesan Synods; and of course feedback on all of that to HoB and to GS. In due course further decisions could then be made.

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November 2024