

Amersham Deanery Synod

Report on November 2023 General Synod group of sessions

General Synod does not normally meet in November (its usual gatherings are in February and July), but this was an extraordinary group of sessions called to consider further proposals from the House of Bishops on the proposed Prayers of Love and Faith (PLF) for the blessing of same-sex couples. These had emerged from the Living in Love and Faith (LLF) consultation and the motion passed by General Synod in February 2023. There were some other pieces of Synod business, but these were dwarfed by the debate on PLF/LLF.

Presidential addresses

The Archbishop of Canterbury's address focused quite heavily on the unfolding crisis in Israel/Palestine. The Archbishop called for the release of hostages and said there was no equivalence between Hamas's atrocities on 7 October and Israel's duty to defend itself. But he also described Israel's bombardment of Gaza as a 'great wrong', and said the evils of Hamas were being paid for by the civilians of Gaza. He described calls for a ceasefire as 'a moral cry' and added his voice to the demands for an immediate humanitarian truce. The Archbishop was also critical of increasing settler violence in the occupied West Bank and called for 'justice, security and peaceful co-existence for Israelis and Palestinians.'

The Archbishop of York's address focused on PLF/LLF and he expressed support for an amendment proposed by the Bishop of Oxford calling on the House of Bishops to introduce standalone services for same-sex couples, 'possibly on a trial basis'. Archbishop Stephen once again called for mutual flourishing and good disagreement in the debate, asking that we 'see Jesus in each other as we speak to and about each other.'

Non-LLF business

Synod gave first consideration to a draft ***Abuse Redress Measure*** which makes provision for a national redress scheme for survivors of Church-related abuse, initially funded by a £150 million contribution from the Church Commissioners. The draft was overwhelmingly approved and will now go to a revision committee for further work, but there were concerns about the proposals for a 'whole Church approach' in which contributions to the redress fund might be 'requested' or 'required' from PCCs and other 'accountable bodies', depending on where the historic abuse had taken place. The counter-argument came from the Church's National Director of Safeguarding, who argued that 'a whole-church approach ...enables all parts of the Church to show contrition for our collective past failings.'

Synod also approved the ***Payments to the Churches Conservation Trust Order 2023*** which authorized total funding over the next three years of at least £4.8 million from the Church Commissioners to the CCT, which works to protect historic churches in England which are 'at risk'.

Prayers of Love and Faith

This debate lasted nine hours and took up the Tuesday afternoon and much of Wednesday. At its heart was a 108-page paper from the House of Bishops (GS 2328) and a motion recognising the 'progress made' by the bishops towards implementing the February Synod motion on LLF, and encouraging the House of Bishops to 'continue its work of implementation.'

GS 2328 (see all General Synod papers [here](#)) included proposals under Canon B5 for the immediate commendation by the House of Bishops of Prayers of Love and Faith for use in 'regularly scheduled Sunday or weekday services'. However, 'standalone services' of blessing for same-sex couples would have to wait for formal approval by General Synod (requiring a two-thirds majority in each of the houses, bishops, clergy and laity) under Canon B2, which could not happen before 2025. GS 2328 also included draft 'pastoral guidance' covering the use of the PLF and how incumbents and PCCs should make decisions about the prayers in 'local contexts'. A third section, setting out how clergy and lay ministers should order their own lives (including whether clergy should be allowed to enter into same-sex marriages) was not however published, as this needed 'further work'.

GS 2328 also included a short 'theological rationale' for the PLF (based essentially on the novel premise of 'pastoral provision in a time of uncertainty') and an annex setting out some of the options for 'pastoral reassurance' measures for those who, in good conscience, could not accept the PLF. The paper was rather vague on the thorny issue of whether the draft prayers indicated a departure from the doctrine of the Church of England, something explicitly excluded by the General Synod motion of February 2023. The House of Bishops had received legal advice on this point, but this seemed equivocal, especially in relation to the proposed 'standalone services' which would look very much like marriage services. The bishops argued however that the prayers and services did not depart from doctrine '*in any essential matter*', wording which appears in both Canons B2 and B5.

It is fair to say that GS 2328 pleased very few people. For some it represented the first practical step towards introducing prayers of blessing for same-sex couples, which many consider to be indicative of a departure from the Church's doctrine of marriage. For others eager for change it seemed like 'crumbs off the table', offering little more than what already happens in many churches. The two-year delay in standalone services was particularly resented, and it is clear that this criticism was keenly felt by the House of Bishops.

As a result, the House of Bishops decided at almost the last moment to propose an amendment to their own motion. Sponsored by the Bishop of Oxford, this asked the House of Bishops 'to consider whether some standalone services for same-sex couples could be made available for use, possibly on a trial basis, on the timescale envisaged by the motion passed by the Synod in February 2023.' This caused some confusion, as there was no explicit timescale for a trial period mentioned in the February 2023 motion, but the amendment was still allowed.

There were thirteen other amendments to the main motion, from both sides of the argument, and discussion of these took up much of the debate. Amendments from those opposed to the prayers focused on the haste with which the House of Bishops were pressing ahead with the PLF and suggested that commendation of the prayers should be deferred until other parts of the overall package (eg the legal advice received by the bishops, the full pastoral guidance and the detailed pastoral reassurance measures) were published and in place. These amendments were all rejected by Synod, with those pressing for change arguing that they were simply delaying tactics. A proposal from the Bishop of Guildford to have the 'suite' of prayers approved within two years under Canon B2 alongside the standalone services, rather than being commended immediately, was also defeated.

The Bishop of Oxford's amendment was however accepted, with majorities in the House of Bishops (25 for, 16 against, 0 abstentions), Clergy (101-94-1) and Laity (99-98-2). One other small amendment was also accepted, with the result that the final motion debated by General Synod was as follows:

That this Synod, conscious that the Church is not of one mind on the issues raised by Living in Love and Faith, that we are in a period of uncertainty, and that many in the Church on all sides are being deeply hurt at this time, recognise the progress made by the House of Bishops towards implementing the motion on Living in Love and Faith passed by this Synod in February 2023, as reported in GS 2328, and encourage the House to continue its work of implementation and ask the House to consider whether some standalone services for same-sex couples could be made available for use, possibly on a trial basis, on the timescale envisaged by the motion passed by the Synod in February 2023.

After further lively debate, this motion was passed, with majorities in the House of Bishops (23-10-4), Clergy (100-93-1) and Laity (104-100-0). The House of Bishops will meet in December to decide how to respond to the motion, but remains significantly divided, with 16 bishops voting against the Bishop of Oxford's amendment (just four voted against the main motion back in February). The Bishop of Oxford indicated at the diocesan synod on 18 November that the next steps will likely involve commendation of the individual prayers 'for use in existing services' by the end of 2023, a process to begin authorization of standalone services under Canon B2 at the February 2024 General Synod, and trial services introduced for an experimental period for those parishes who want them and opt-in from March 2024.

Comment

I will not rehearse the arguments for and against the Prayers of Love and Faith, which are well-known. The fact is that General Synod is more-or-less split down the middle, with a 52/48% split in favour of change, almost identical to that which emerged in the February 2023 debate (although the margins in the House of Laity are getting narrower, and an increasing number of bishops are dissenting). The bishops are sharply divided, albeit with a majority in favour of change. There is no precedent for pushing through controversial and potentially doctrine-changing liturgy on the basis of such tiny majorities – that is why a two-thirds majority is required in Synod for liturgical and doctrinal change. There are moreover significant concerns about the process adopted to date, and whether the bishops have abused their power in their desperation to 'get PLF done', particularly in their refusal to disclose to the Houses of Clergy and Laity the legal advice they received regarding the consistency of the prayers with the Church's existing doctrine. Moreover, back in February 2023 the Archbishop of York said he could not commend the Prayers of Love and Faith until the full package of proposals on pastoral guidance and pastoral reassurance were in place. Yet here we have prayers being commended and services being fast-tracked on an experimental basis with only two-thirds of the pastoral guidance published and nothing tangible offered on pastoral reassurance. The latest Synod debate has highlighted major concerns about lack of transparency and a loss of trust in the House of Bishops.

Jeremy Moodey - November 2023

jeremy@stmaryschesham.org