

Dear Bishop Christopher,

We were grateful for the opportunity at General Synod to share in the important work of *Living in Love and Faith (LLF)* and to receive more details about the extensive work being undertaken to prepare teaching and learning resources from the House of Bishops in 2020. We have listened and learnt further from the discussions together at the College in September. Following conversations among ourselves, and aware of others' responses to this ongoing project, we are writing to share some of our own perspectives with you as Chair and with the wider Co-Ordinating Group.

As other debates at the recent General Synod made clear – notably those on the environment and national security – we are wrestling as a church with numerous complex and contested ethical issues, not just sexuality. Many of these are of global as well as national significance. We believe consideration of these is an integral part of the Church of England's witness and mission as we share the good news of salvation in Christ and call people to turn, believe, and follow Him. Through our corporate discernment, guided by the wisdom of previous generations and led by the Spirit, we seek afresh to understand biblical truth on contested issues and offer this as public truth for the common good in our pluralist, post-Christendom society. We can also work out how we encourage and equip one another faithfully to fulfil our calling as a church to embody the gospel of Christ through distinctive patterns of lived faith and love that offer a positive way of life in and to our culture.

Setting our consideration of *LLF's* work in this wider context of mission and discipleship confirms its significance and also some of the distinctive features arising from its focus on "Human Identity, Sexuality and Marriage". We again were reminded that these matters not only require serious intellectual engagement and much learning from us all, across the range of disciplines presented to Synod. They also touch us all deeply – theologically, socially and politically, relationally, and personally. We heard and felt afresh the depth and breadth of so many people's pains, fears and hopes and the force of the wide range of understandings and experiences present. These present major challenges for us as, in relation to human sexuality, we seek to teach and learn and discern together what it means to live lives worthy of the gospel and to "bring the grace and truth of Christ to this generation and make Him known to those in our care".

There can also be little doubt that issues of human identity, sexuality and marriage are of particular global concern. This is due to their inherent and

universal significance, the questions being raised and innovations being introduced in relation to historic Christian teaching and practice and the received reading of Scripture, and the diverse perspectives and social contexts found in our pluralist world. These aspects were highlighted for us by Synod's own discussions taking place after the gathering of nearly two thousand Anglicans from fifty countries at GAFCON and as The Episcopal Church's General Convention struggled to enable the flourishing of those within it who remain committed to traditional biblical teaching. These two meetings, and the recent decisions within the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia, showed us the importance for our unity of how we teach and learn on these contested matters. They were also a reminder that recent history tragically demonstrates that introducing changes in teaching and liturgy has consistently divided Anglicans globally and within provinces. It is therefore clear to us that both the substance and the method of *LLF*'s work is of great significance. What it produces will not only prove vitally important for our witness here in England and in the world church but will either enable or undermine our quest for unity-in-truth within the Church of England and Anglican Communion.

General Synod also reaffirmed the experience of our previous Shared Conversations and the pattern in Anglican and other churches in the Global North: in the context of new understandings and experiences of the diversity of human sexuality and our changing cultural context, many are questioning or have rejected traditional Christian teaching on human identity, sexuality and marriage. We believe we cannot dismiss such questioning out of hand given that, historically, Christian teaching changes and develops (particularly in and through mission and encountering new cultures). The church must always be reformed according to the Word of God (*ecclesia semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei*), and God has "more truth yet to break forth out of His Holy Word". But neither can we simply abandon what we have received in order to appear relevant and avoid feeling uncomfortable. As God's people carefully re-read Scripture together, allowing it to teach us, we may be challenged where we are wrong and be led into deep learning, serious intellectual persuasion, and heart-felt repentance for past errors. Our longing is to be built up into the fullness of Jesus Christ our Lord whose way of *living in love and faith* we seek to follow.

In our ongoing dialogue about this we hope *LLF* will help us maintain the central place of Scripture and see how we relate this to the tradition of lived interpretation and insights gained from personal experience, cultural trends and scientific thought. In particular, we believe it important that *LLF* not only carefully maps out the new arguments being advanced

that challenge traditional teaching but also offers teaching which provides a theological evaluation of them that is based on Scripture, in line with our Anglican tradition. As the 1958 Lambeth Conference stated, it is “through Holy Scripture, and supremely through Christ’s teaching” that God has led us “to uniquely deep insights into the nature of the family and its necessities and possibilities” and all questions in this area “must be related, consciously and directly, to the creative, redemptive, and sanctifying power of God”.

We recognise that the teaching of the church affects LGBT+ people personally and deeply: those who are living within the traditional teaching of the church and those who wish to see it changed. We are committed to providing pastoral care for all people. *LLF* will therefore rightly attend carefully to the experience and understandings of LGBT+ people (and their diverse self-understandings and visions of the faithful pattern of Christian discipleship). We also believe that *LLF* must recognise and address the wider challenges in church and society to traditional Christian teaching. In recognising these wider challenges alongside the questions raised by LGBT+ people it is therefore important we do not to lose sight of our common, shared humanity and the need for the church to offer a coherent, single ethic for all of us as people whose fundamental identity is not something we define for ourselves: rather that we are made in God’s image, have fallen captive to sin, are redeemed by Christ, and are being sanctified by the Spirit. This ethic has been repeatedly affirmed by Lambeth Conferences as, for example, in the 1978 reference to the traditional teaching of “faithfulness and chastity both within and outside marriage”. Our hope is that *LLF* will enable us as a church better to understand and proclaim this unchangeable Christian standard afresh in this generation and equip us so we can pastorally help people to attain it in the power of the Spirit.

We are convinced that it is essential for *LLF* to clearly articulate and explore the traditional teaching of the Anglican Communion. The form of this is what Lambeth 1920 called a “pure and chaste life before and after marriage” and is expressed in the received teaching of the Church of England and summarised, for example, in Canon B30, the 1987 General Synod motion, and numerous Lambeth resolutions, most notably Resolution I.10 from the 1998 Lambeth Conference. We believe that this vision of (1) sexual intercourse as “an act of total commitment which belongs properly within a permanent married relationship” (Lambeth 1988), (2) marriage as a union of a man and woman in a covenant of love marked by exclusivity and life-long commitment, and (3) faithful, sexually abstinent love in singleness and non-marital friendships, is the teaching of Scripture. It therefore expresses the character and will of God which is

our guide in ordering our lives and in addressing public global ethical issues. We also believe that reaffirming this teaching offers us the best way of maintaining our unity-in-truth. We therefore hope that, as well as considering why this “traditional biblical teaching” (Lambeth 1988) is being questioned and rejected by some, *LLF* will clearly articulate it and commend it, explaining *why* it has been, and remains, a deeply-held conviction for most Christians. Here we believe it is vitally important that *LLF* help the Church of England engage with these issues ecumenically. We were encouraged that, in May, ARCIC III announced its forthcoming report “Walking Together on the Way: Learning to be Church - Local, Regional, Universal” and is pursuing further work on its mandate to consider “how in communion the local and universal Church comes to discern right ethical teaching”.

Our recent Anglican experience has made clear that our deep differences in this area make “walking together on the way” not only a challenge ecumenically but within existing denominational structures. We therefore think it essential that, as part of providing teaching and learning, *LLF* must also help us consider the implications of these differences for our common life. As was shown by the response to GS2055, the House of Bishops’ conviction that we should reaffirm our current teaching, liturgy and discipline and consider the limits of legitimate pastoral practice within these, will be very difficult for many to accept. It is also clear, however, that any change in teaching or liturgy will also create major problems for many of us both here and in the wider Communion. This is evident, for example, from the Church of England Evangelical Council’s helpful recent work which explores the rationale for “visible differentiation” (in “Gospel, Church & Marriage: Preserving Apostolic Faith and Life”) and possible forms this might take (in “Guarding the Deposit”) should the church accept new teaching or practice. We therefore hope that *LLF* will go beyond helping us to understand and evaluate our different perspectives. If it can also address the practical consequences of these sincerely held differences concerning how we live in love and faith it will also assist us to live better in love and faith. We will then be able to consider how our structures may need to adapt so as to enable good, continued fellowship, respect, dialogue and co-operation with one another in Christ while honestly recognising the impact of our disagreements on the shape and degrees of communion truly present among us.

We are grateful for the work that you, Dr. Eeva John, and many others are doing as part of *LLF* and hope that these reflections will be of some help. We continue to pray for all involved, and the church as a whole, that, in the words of the General Thanksgiving, God may give us all such a due sense of all his mercies that “our hearts may be unfeignedly

thankful, and that we shew forth thy praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives; by giving up ourselves to thy service, and by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness all our days”.

With our greetings and prayers,

The Bishops of Carlisle, Shrewsbury, Durham, Ludlow, Birkenhead,
Willesden, Peterborough, Plymouth, Blackburn, Maidstone, Lancaster