Bishop of
EBBSFLEET
Rt Rev Dr Rob Munro

15 November 2023

Dear brothers and sisters,

I wanted to write in the immediate aftermath of the General Synod to help people understand what has and has not been decided, and offer some preliminary reflections on how we might respond emotionally, pastorally, theologically and practically. After 9 hours debating over 2 days, with 14 amendments, only 2 of which passed, the General Synod has asked the Bishops to continue implementation of their proposals to commend the Prayers of Love and Faith. The final vote had only a tight margin in the end, reflecting the deep divisions this is introducing into the Church. I am grateful for the many who spoke up courageously and clearly in the debate, calling for greater clarity of the theology, tangible proposals for conscience provision and greater transparency of process, particularly as significant legal advice to the House of Bishops was not made available to the Synod. The seriousness of the issue has left many feeling drained and grieving that the Church should apparently be driven more by a desire not to 'delay' things, rather than to scrutinise details and ensure the full theological and pastoral coherence of proposals. That has been compounded by the feeling that a 'commending' process has only been enacted because of the lack of 2/3 majorities required to treat this issue properly as doctrinal or liturgical business.

At the end of the debate, the General Synod passed the following motion:
'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.'
The motion was passed by the House of Bishops by 23 to 10 with 4 abstentions; in the House of Clergy by 100 to 93 with 1 abstention; and in the House of Laity by 104 to 100 with no abstentions.

The debate revealed the deep-seated and apparently irreconcilable differences at every level of the church about issues that lie at the heart of our faith, including our commitment to the authority of Scripture, the nature of marriage and the nature of pastoral care.

What has been decided

The Synod has supported the ongoing implementation of Prayers of Love and Faith (PLF) originally outlined in February 2023, whose key points are:

- There is currently no formal change to the doctrine and teaching of the church about marriage, as only between one man and one woman, and that is the only proper place for sexual intimacy.
- What is proposed is now understood as a '*pastoral provision*' that does not depart from doctrine '*in any essential matter*'. That phrase was added because the proposals could be considered to be '*indicative of a change in doctrine*', but a pastoral provision of this sort might be deemed not to be an '*essential*' change.
- The theological justification for the prayers is now '*a pastoral outworking for a time of uncertainty that respects the Church of England's unchanged doctrine of marriage*'. '*Uncertainty*' is really describing competing contradictory certainties, which might usually merit caution, but is being used to justify ongoing progress.

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- The PLF originally was said to require 3 aspects: Prayers, Pastoral Guidance and Pastoral Reassurance, that should proceed together. This Synod agreed to proceed with Pastoral Guidance unfinished and the reassurance of '*formal structural pastoral provision*' unprepared because it will be an 'iterative process'.
- The '*implementation'* the Synod called for will involve:
  - Commending the suite of prayers for use in private or public worship for same-sex couples, without reference to their legal status of relationship. This can happen with only the agreement of the incumbent, and any PCC consultation is only recommended. This is likely to happen by December 2023
  - Work on pastoral guidance will be now completed for using the PLF, guiding the ministers on how to use them (Part 1), and how the minister's decision should be handled in parishes (Part 2). There is no guidance yet for ministers using the prayers for their own relationships (part 3), that is expected in 2024.
  - Considering trialling 'standalone services' for use in the context of same-sex couples to mark their relationships. The details for how this can be done are likely to be presented in the Spring 2024.
  - Further work on 'pastoral reassurance' including the details of what '*formal structural pastoral provision*' will be provided for those who dissent, also likely to be presented in the Spring 2024.

What are the implications

The Synod has supported the House of Bishops' proposal which, while not proposing to change the doctrine or teaching on marriage and sexual practice at least in an 'essential matter', will nevertheless allow something explicitly against the 1998 Lambeth resolution 1.10, which has caused the 'tear in the fabric' of the Anglican Communion when propagated elsewhere. It is a tragedy that the Church of England should allow that tear to widen, not only in the wider Communion, but now in the Church of England itself.

There is clearly now an urgent need for the '*formal structural pastoral provision*' for conscientious disagreement for those of us who believe the use of prayers for same-sex couples is indicative of a change to the doctrine of marriage and sexual ethics in ways that put people's faith and salvation at risk, that is 'in an essential matter'. When you change what people are called to repent of in the light of Christ, you have changed his gospel of repentance and faith by which we receive His grace of salvation. While it is acknowledged that a majority of the House of Bishops do not agree, specifically the 23 who have publicly supported these changes in the Synod, the fact that a significant minority of those called to '*uphold the faith they have received'* believe this does put God's honour and people at risk, shows how serious this issue is.

However, the Church of Jesus Christ, nor even the Church of England, is not constituted by a majority view of Bishops or Synods. That is explicit in our 39 Articles: *Article 21. Of the Authority of General Councils. General Councils may not be gathered together without the commandment and will of Princes. And when they be gathered together, (forasmuch as they be an assembly of men, whereof all be not governed with the Spirit and Word of God),* ***they may err, and sometimes have erred****, even in things pertaining unto God. Wherefore things ordained by them as necessary to salvation have neither strength nor authority, unless it may be declared that they be taken out of holy Scripture.* The decision of the Synod does not make it impossible to be a faithful Anglican or a faithful Christian, even if it will impair the fellowship we have with some within the church.

What next?

The immediate aftermath of divisive decisions always and rightly generates strong emotions, but we need to guard against precipitous reactions. The grief we share needs to be turned first to prayer. Psalm 37 sums it up: *Do not fret because of those who are evil or be envious of those who do wrong; [2] for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away. [3] Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. [4] Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. [5] Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this: [6] He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn, your vindication like the noonday sun. [7] Be still before the Lord and wait*

patiently for him; do not fret when people succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes. [8] *Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil.* [9] *For those who are evil will be destroyed, but those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land.*

Trust Him - *"Trust in the Lord and do good"* – our primary calling is still to faithfully proclaim the gospel of grace through repentance and faith in Christ, to keep doing the good we are called to.

Remain in Him - *"Dwell in the land"* – our security is found in the place he has called us to be.

Hope in Him – *"He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn, your vindication like the noonday sun… those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land"* – our faithfulness is not decided by synod, but at the Lord's judgement seat.

Wait for Him – "*Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him"* – we're called to stand faithfully and patiently for what is right, and trust God to work to honour his name, whether in covenant blessing or cursing.

The Psalm ends with a great promise: [39]*The salvation of the righteous comes from the Lord; he is their stronghold in time of trouble.* [40]*The Lord helps them and delivers them; he delivers them from the wicked and saves them because they take refuge in him.*

However to take a stand, trusting the Lord, will require us to take action to express that. The exact nature of how impaired fellowship is now to be expressed will need to be worked out in the light of what details finally emerge from the final pastoral guidance and '*formal structural pastoral provision*'. There is a need to work out a careful balance on those passages calling for public opposition to those who preach a different gospel (eg Gal.1:1-9), to not give a church welcome to those teaching falsely (eg 2 John 9-10, Rom.16:17-18) and to seek to express a discipline to restore those going astray (eg 1 Cor.5:15); but also to those passages calling us to uphold unity in the Lord and His Word (eg Eph 4:3-6), to expect Him be the one to discipline us (eg Heb 12:5-11) or even to remove us from His Church (eg Rev.2:5). It is in the union of truth and love that we express what it is to be Jesus' family, even when some stray. While that may call for a painful distancing from what some are determined to press ahead with, such as the father in the parable of the prodigal experienced, the desire for the restoration of our family unity should always be our passion and prayer.

That process of working out the details of our responses should be done together with others, and not separately. I have been really encouraged to see how those who are 'orthodox', that is upholding the biblical, traditional views of marriage and sexual activity, for example in the CEEC or the 'Alliance', have found a greater unity of purpose and fellowship together. Let me encourage you to hold together with them as they work to ensure that the finally proposed '*formal structural pastoral provision*' is coherent, sufficient and conscientiously able to bear the weight that it will have to bear. The doctrine of the Church of England continues to assert the supremacy of Scripture and the sanctity of marriage; it remains our responsibility to respond to error in the Church by contending for the faith in truth and love for the honour of Jesus.

Let me remind you that I am holding a series of 'virtual coffee and chats' next TUESDAY 21st NOVEMBER. It is intended as a 'surgery' for people to drop in an out of as they want with opportunity to ask questions and reflect on the issues the Synod has raised. There are three slots: 10-12am, 1-3pm, and 7-9pm. To join the Zoom Meetings CLICK HERE or use the Zoom Meeting ID: 825 5730 4202, Passcode: +Ebbsfleet

Join us if you can then; but for now, please continue to pray together, stand together and act together!

Yours in Christ,

Rt Rev Dr Rob Munro