

General Synod Monday 13th – Wednesday 15th November 2023

London

General Synod packed in roughly 20 hours of business interspersed with worship in the course of 2.5 days. Half of the total was dedicated specifically to matters relating to the Prayers of Love & Faith (“PLF”) for same sex couples. These prayers, and the method by which they were to be introduced, were being put to Synod by the House of Bishops (“HoB”) in its working out of the Living in Love and Faith (“LLF”) motion that Synod had approved in February earlier this year. The subject also featured heavily in the Questions agenda item, where 93 questions tabled by members were specific to LLF, and many of the other 133 had some bearing on the topic.

At the meeting outset, the Archbishop of Canterbury delivered a powerful Presidential Address on the conflict in the Holy Land. He affirmed the right of Israel to defend itself but set this alongside the need to respect international law on armed conflict. He renewed his call for an end to the bloodshed, the release of the hostages held by Hamas and for the urgent provision of aid to the people of Gaza. He concluded with a blunt demand: “the killing must stop”.

There followed a Presidential Address by the Archbishop of York, which set the scene for the LLF debate. He explained his own position as being fully supportive of the proposals. Acknowledging that this was a divisive topic, he committed himself to working for the flourishing of the whole Church, with all its differences. By walking together, the Church could lead by example in showing how to live with difference and, in so doing, would enable people to see Jesus better.

Later on the Monday, Synod held an informal session in which the Bishop of London summarised the LLF work undertaken since February, and the reasoning behind some changes of approach. These were set out in [GS2328: Living in Love and Faith – Setting Out The Progress Made And Work Still To Do](#). The HoB now proposed to:

- Commend the PLF for use in private prayer and as part of regularly scheduled services.
- Commend a brief set of Prayers for Covenanted Friendships. (These prayers would provide for the prayerful recognition of a commitment by two individuals to each other in a non-sexual relationship).
- Bring forward legislation for the authorising, under Canon B2, of standalone PLF services for same-sex couples. (Note: this will require referral of the proposed services to diocesan synods and approval by a two-thirds majority in each General Synod’s Houses: Bishops, Clergy and Laity. It represents a significant change from the simpler route of commendation that had been indicated in February).

The Bishop of London was followed by the Bishops of Worcester, Guildford, Southwark and Winchester, who openly shared their differences of opinion on GS2328, two of them being supportive and two concerned that the matter was being progressed too fast and that it would undermine the doctrine of marriage. These same concerns were re-iterated by various speakers when the debate proper started on the Tuesday afternoon, running through to a final vote on the Wednesday afternoon. Other points raised by those opposed to the PLF included:

- Allegations of a lack transparency by the HoB (it was very evident that some members did not trust the bishops).
- Calls for the HoB to go beyond GS2328’s contents and publish full details of its discussions and the legal advice it had received.
- Calls for the Pastoral Guidance that would accompany the liturgy for the standalone services to be completed and published before commending the PLF.
- Calls for the alternative pastoral provision, proposed in GS2328 for those who cannot support use of the PLF material, to be fully developed before commending the PLF.
- Statements that use of the PLF material would be contrary to the Church’s teaching that the proper place for sexual activity is within marriage.
- Statements that any provision that condoned same sex relationships was wrong.

Points raised by those speakers who wanted to move ahead with PLF included:

- Statements that GS2328 represented a backward step, and further delay, against what had been decided by Synod in February.
- Calls to recognise the hurt that was continuing to be felt by those who identified as LGBTQIA+.
- Calls to maintain unity, pointing to how the CoE has always been able to hold together diverse views.

- Statements that the CoE's decision to allow divorcees to remarry in church demonstrated that the doctrine of marriage has changed over time, and without the need for separate pastoral provision for those opposed to it.
- Calls to allow LGBTQIA+ clergy to marry.
- Calls to get the PLF proposals implemented so that the CoE could then focus on its calling to minister to all in the country.

Both those for and those against the proposals appealed to scripture, claimed support from within their congregations, and cited lived experiences to support their arguments. Both Machiavelli and St Augustine were referenced. While a few speakers were intemperate in how they expressed themselves, my perception was that the overall tenor of the debate was generally better than it had been in February. This was greatly helped by Mr Geoffrey Tattersall's scrupulously balanced and expert chairing.

14 amendments to the main motion had been tabled by Synod members. One was not debated as it lacked adequate support and one was carried on a show of hands. The other 12 all went to votes by houses, and of these only one (to open up the possibility of trialling the standalone PLF services) was passed, and then by the margin of a single vote in the House of Laity (99 for, 98 against, with two recorded abstentions).

The amended motion finally voted on by 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 GS2328, 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 passed in all three houses (Bishops: 23 for, 10 against, 4 abstentions; Clergy: 100 for, 93 against, 1 abstention; Laity: 104 for, 100 against, no abstentions). It is now anticipated that the HoB will issue its commendation of the PLF for use in private prayer and within regularly scheduled services, and the Prayers for Covenanted Friendships, sometime in December, and that the associated pastoral guidance will be issued at the same time. The legal process for authorising the standalone PLF services is due to start at Synod's next meeting in February. The timing of any trialling of the standalone PLF services, and any attendant conditions, will have to be considered and decided by the HoB.

Besides the above, other business handled by Synod included:

- A draft measure to provide redress for victims & survivors of Church-connected safeguarding abuse was approved to proceed to the revision stage of the legal process. The draft measure provides for the redress to be made from central funds provided by the Church Commissioners, though with a financial contribution being made by the body (such as a PCC, a Cathedral Chapter or a Diocesan Board of Finance) accountable for the person committing the abuse.
- An order was approved authorising payments over next three years by the Church Commissioners to the Churches Conservation Trust.

One final point of interest for our diocese, in response to a question I tabled, the First Church Estates Commissioner undertook to review the basis on which the Church Commissioners pay a higher proportion of the annual Legal Officers Fees for some dioceses than for others, ranging from 25% to 59%, with the proportions applicable to each diocese having remained unchanged since at least 1974. At 29%, the proportion of our diocese's annual Legal Officers fees paid by the Church Commissioners is the second lowest of all the dioceses, so any revision is likely to benefit us.

As always, if you have any questions relating to General Synod, please do contact either me or any of the other members representing our diocese. Our contact details are available at [General Synod - Lincoln Diocese \(anglican.org\)](https://www.lincolndiocese.org.uk/general-synod).