

Living in Love and Faith: Discerning the Mind of the Church

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The transition between the early stages of the Living in Love and Faith project and its later progress through our Synodical structures was always going to be a bumpy ride. Various pastoral developments had already been accepted along the way – for example, the permission given to clergy to enter same-sex civil partnerships – which means that further accommodations were difficult to imagine which would not begin to impinge on significant doctrinal or liturgical questions. Seeking to come to a common mind on those issues, however, was clearly set to be a challenge.

The idea of a ‘common mind’ or ‘the mind of the Church’ is founded on scriptural verses such as Luke’s reflection in Acts 2:42, ‘*All the believers were one in heart and mind*’ and Paul’s encouragement in Philippians 2:2, ‘*Make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and mind*’. There appears to have been such unanimity at the conclusion of the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15, whose promulgation was initiated by the ‘*apostles and elders with the whole church*’; and a similar conclusion is recorded at the end of the proceedings of the First Council of Nicaea following rigorous debate. Nicaea, in particular, reminds us how both Creed and Canons were thought essential in maintaining the truth, unity and discipline of the Church.

Meanwhile, in the centuries between those two great Councils, Irenaeus and others developed the idea of the ‘apostolic tradition’ as a complementary means of preserving that truth, unity and discipline, operating as a kind of corporate memory of the mind of Christ within the Church.

Is unanimity required, though, before the Church can move forward doctrinally, liturgically or missionally? Such a conclusion would give undue influence to an individual or small group among her number to block all change, however necessary for the wellbeing of the whole. In recognition of that reality, the canons of the Church of England make a judgement call on establishing the mind of the Church in matters of liturgy and therefore matters of doctrine (given the principle of *lex orandi, lex credendi*¹).

The mind of the Church is here expressed as a two-thirds majority in each of the Houses of General Synod: a relatively high bar, as supporters of the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate experienced, at times all too painfully; but a standard set to preserve the Church's unity and to discern the promptings of God's Spirit, so far as humanly possible, through the inevitable controversies that would otherwise threaten to tear the Church down the middle.

In the early days of the LLF process it was largely assumed that Canon B2, which enshrines this principle, would be adhered to, but that it would be difficult to meet the two-thirds threshold within a divided Synod. It was against this background that various senior evangelical leaders and their liberal counterparts joined together in the so-called *St. Hugh's Conversations* on the initiative of the Bishop of Oxford, so as to work on the outline of a possible settlement in the event of a Synodical stalemate.

However, an alternative approach was soon proposed, which sought to bypass Canon B2 altogether, or at least consign it to some indefinite point in the future. By moving the proposals forward one by one, rather than as a complete package – and by doing so on the basis of a series of shifting (and often conflicting) theological and legal justifications – simple majorities in the Houses of General Synod could generally be secured by thin majorities and the argument advanced that each step, in itself, was relatively insignificant. The theological and legal integrity of Canon B2 continued to enter the debate from time to time including in a motion from the House of Bishops to General Synod in October 2023: indeed the Pastoral Guidance to the Prayers of Love and Faith still asserts that standalone services will need to go through the full B2 process; but all too often that integrity was trumped by expediency in a way that has significantly dented trust in the House of Bishops. Indeed, expediency has been the sole reason regularly advanced for such an approach.

For those on the progressive side of the debate, the desire to see real and speedy progress is, of course, understandable; indeed, the approach seems to have been successful on one level, in helping the Prayers of Love and Faith over the Synodical line – though only in the context of accompanying Pastoral Guidance, which continues to assert the current teaching of the Church:

'Holy Matrimony is a lifelong covenant between one man and one woman, blessed by God in creation and pointing to the love between Christ and the Church; a way of life which Christ makes holy. It is within marriage that sexual intimacy finds its proper place'.

But there are at least four problems here, moving forward. One is that the effectiveness of the Faith and Order Commission (FAOC) is being regularly limited or undermined by artificial timetables and unrealistic expectations. Another is that proposed future developments are only heightening the theological complexities with which FAOC is engaged. A third is that the probability of successful legal challenge is thereby increased, without the doctrinal and legal assurance that would accompany the normal B2 process – a risk that may well fall on individual clergy or on their Diocesan Boards of Finance. And the fourth, most significantly, is that we have bypassed a serious attempt to discern the mind of the Church (as our canons define it), so dramatically raising the theological and emotional stakes.

In particular, the decision to avoid normal canonical disciplines has galvanised the emergence and growth of the Alliance – a gathering of significant network leaders (both evangelical and catholic) who together oversee some of the most energetic and youthful churches within the Church of England; whilst the call to return to proper process has equally been a consistent cry from a considerable number of bishops from a variety of church traditions. Meanwhile the 'Together for the Church of England' network has been equally

frustrated by the slow and somewhat grudging nature of the process, and many who identify as LGBTQI+ have felt caught in the middle of a culture war, which is entirely contrary to what was intended from the start.

To be a focus of unity is also proving an increasing challenge for bishops in these circumstances, whatever their theological convictions; and many would name the current divisions over LLF as a significant challenge to their own, and their clergy's, wellbeing, as well as a distraction from the wider missional and global foci with which we all wish to better engage. Meanwhile a considerable number of ordinands are facing questions of conscience as to whether they feel able to give canonical obedience to those whom they see as failing to uphold the canons themselves.

From a traditional evangelical and catholic perspective (which is increasingly being shared by others too), the essential first step from here is to get the process onto the right track, so that we can take seriously the mind of the Church, rather than pressing on with an approach that feels inadequate at best and potentially schismatic at worst. Trust will simply not be restored until this wrong is righted.

One of the complexities of the approach thus far adopted is a lack of clarity about the end point envisaged. Are conservatives simply ‘making a fuss about a bunch of pastoral prayers’, as has sometimes been suggested – or is the Church set upon a course whose destination will almost inevitably lead to a change in our doctrine of marriage – either de facto or canonically - and its teaching on the place of sex within it? This question has been sharpened further since a proposed distinction between civil marriage and holy matrimony has been revealed as inadequate, on the grounds that marriage is a gift of God in creation. Similar suggested distinctions – between commended services and liturgy, for example, or doctrine and teaching, have proved to be equally unsustainable in this context, and are commonly viewed as special pleading.

The concept of proportionality has been widely advocated here, given the range of possible futures before us. Many who are instinctively conservative, for example, would accept the current status quo, with their clergy colleagues opting in to the Prayers of Love and Faith and themselves choosing not to do so – provided their theological convictions played no part in future decisions about their deployability at all levels within the Church. However, to quote from paragraph 158 in the FAOC Report of February 2025 (GS Misc. 1406):

‘Three changes... would in the minds of some necessitate far more robust and visible forms of separation... a) allowing standalone services that may therefore resemble services of holy matrimony; b) permitting clergy to marry their same sex partner,

and c) introducing a second doctrine of marriage alongside the extant statement in [canon] B30 or amending the one doctrine of marriage to be inclusive of any two persons’.

The present status quo is arguably one to which the principle of *adiaphora*² could be applied, in other words, whilst standalone services would cross the line for many, unless there were stringent restrictions on their use which would understandably raise the hackles (or invite the ridicule) of those wishing to use them. But the clear change of doctrine implicit, say, in relaxing the discipline on clergy in relation to same-sex marriages³ - or explicit in revising Canon B30 altogether - would stretch that beyond breaking point, given that the Church’s teaching on marriage as a monogamous relationship between a man and a woman is ‘catholic’ doctrine in the fullest sense of the word, as set out in the Vincentian Canon⁴. It has been believed everywhere, always, and by all Christians – at least until most recent times.

GS Misc.1406 includes a full and useful discussion on the nature of our disunity, based on the categorisation of a previous FAOC Report, *Communion and Disagreement* (2016), and there is no need to repeat those arguments here. But paragraph 139 of the Report helpfully responds to a question which underlies and exacerbates many of our current tensions, viz. who should decide the extent and nature of a disagreement between two opposing parties.

‘It is a failure of Christian love’, the paragraph begins, *‘for one side to declare what kind of disagreement is being experienced*

by the other. It must surely be the case that those who disagree with a given decision are themselves determinative of what kind of disagreement is in view, not the content majority... If it is widely held that such-and-such a belief or practice calls into question apostolic or ecclesial communion, then the disagreement simply is a first- or second-order disagreement, regardless of whether the majority think [otherwise]’.

The paragraph rightly places an emphasis on the phrase ‘*widely held*’ to highlight that individualistic or eccentric viewpoints are not in view here. But it also critiques the curious process by which 54% of the General Synod can decide that our disunity is *adiaphora* against the 46% who disagree! *‘If there is to be any meaningful ongoing dialogue’*, the paragraph concludes, *‘it must proceed from the basis of acknowledging and accepting that, for a large proportion of those who disagree, the disagreement is of first- or second-order significance’.*

This paper is not the place to spell out in detail just *why* the 46% might hold that view, except to make the obvious point that many simply fail to accept that a change in the Church’s inherited teaching on marriage and sex is warranted on the basis of their reading of Scripture. A Christian understanding of marriage, for them, is rooted in the doctrines of creation and redemption, so cannot be changed without affecting those doctrines. It represents the union of reconciled human diversity from which new life is born and is sacramental, at least in its broader sense - a sign of the love of Christ for the church, and of the church’s loving response,

inviting us into the fellowship with God that is at the heart of the gospel.

Marriage, in this inherited understanding, is one of the primary witnesses to that gospel in public life. Every marriage witnesses to the goodness of the created order and to the reconciliation between God and humanity which the gospel proclaims. That does not negate a wider range of loving, committed, covenant friendships within the community; but it does regard the heterosexual nature of *marriage* as fundamental to the institution itself, at least from a Christian perspective - rendering the argument that this is a question of peripheral theological importance, an ‘inessential matter’ in the terms of Canon B5(3), unsustainable.

Many within that 46% (to use the shorthand) are cradle Anglicans. They are used to belonging to a broad church liturgically and pastorally and may well appreciate that breadth. They are happy to worship alongside fellow believers with varying views and opinions on a range of issues. They are absolutely committed to an inclusive church, with a small ‘i’ at least, and willing to be challenged where they miss the mark. They are prepared to tolerate a degree of diversity within the Church’s teaching, and considerable pastoral accommodation from their bishops. Some of them, at least, recognise that they ‘see through a glass darkly’ and may be wrong. But anything that appears to endanger the Church’s biblical foundations in such a significant matter – and especially to do so in an inadequate or uncanonical way – is a red line they are unwilling to cross. In that sense, this isn’t an argument about marriage and sex

at all. It is rather about the role of scripture in shaping our theology, liturgy and daily life, together with a call to proper process.

The place of episcopacy against this backdrop is a complex one on both sides of the theological fence – especially given that *sitting* on that fence has become an increasingly unviable option. Few bishops, at the outset of LLF, advocated a change in the Church’s teaching on marriage, and all were agreed that there are goods to be found in long-term, faithful same-sex partnerships. But the pastoral accommodation that had already been put forward – together, arguably, with the commendation of the Prayers of Love and Faith - may well have reached the limit of what could be provided within these strictures.

Given the particular role of the bishop to ‘*teach and uphold sound and wholesome doctrine, and to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange opinions*’ (Canon C18), those seen as supporting further developments have therefore faced concern from some who hold their licence (or indeed are shortly to do so following their Petertide ordinations) – a concern exacerbated once again by the muddle and irregularities of the current approach. There is, after all, an uncomfortable tradition going back to Patristic times (and rooted in the New Testament itself) of laity and clergy disassociating themselves from bishops whose teaching is adjudged ‘unsound’ or ‘unwholesome’ (in the terms of Canon C18)⁵.

A more nuanced approach was suggested by Richard Hooker in the late 16th century, though in a very different context, and has

tended to shape Anglican ecclesiology ever since. Despite his robust critique of the ‘*gross and grievous abominations*’ of the Church of Rome, Hooker acknowledged that ‘*touching those main parts of Christian truth wherein they persist, we gladly acknowledge them to be of the family of Jesus Christ*’⁶. The concept of ‘impaired communion’ is built on foundations such as these, acknowledging serious disagreements whilst still seeking to avoid unnecessary fragmentation for a whole variety of reasons, theological, relational, missional, experiential and practical. (Hooker’s use of the word ‘gladly’ is particularly generous here). Much the same approach has been adopted by the Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Unity, Faith and Order (IASCUFO) over the past few years, in an attempt to reset relationships within the Anglican Communion.

There are other considerations, too, alongside the purely doctrinal ones, and of these the most pressing relates to the inherent illiberalism within much of liberalism towards those who take a contrary view – not a solely church-related concern, of course, but societal too, and nowhere more so than in the areas of gender and sexuality. (Conservatives can be equally illiberal towards liberals, of course, and there is an internal logic to this tendency on both sides of the divide.)

In a high trust environment, this would be less of an issue in the life of the Church, where theologically more conservative clergy and laity would have confidence that they would be fully supported by the bishops of the present and future, provided their views were sensitively and pastorally expressed. Other churches and faith

groups in the UK would equally be sure of a degree of protection offered by the established Church, not least through its privileged voice in Parliament. Ordinands would believe that in five, ten, thirty years’ time there would still be bishops who conscientiously agreed with the position they took, rather than tolerating it at best. Interviewees would know that they would be judged on the basis of their character, calling and competence rather than predominantly on their answer to the LLF question, however phrased.

Regrettably, though, trust is at a low ebb, and global and historical precedents provide plenty of case studies to support a more sceptical conclusion, given that in no case worldwide - other than the consecration of Provincial Episcopal Visitors here in England - have lasting efforts been made to maintain a theological balance within the episcopate, either locally or provincially. Even the PEV exception to the rule has coincided with a sharp fall in the number of diocesan and suffragan appointments from their constituencies, and howls of protest when such an appointment is trailed. The fear is therefore that history will repeat itself with the far greater number of open evangelicals who are fully egalitarian when it comes to women’s ministry but retain a historically orthodox understanding of marriage. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that that concern is already making a significant dent in ordinand numbers, especially from evangelical backgrounds, fuelled by the current polarisation and uncertainty: a real worry for a Church which is so strongly dependent on the life and energy of the evangelical movement to help foster evangelism, church planting and vocations, and drive our three national priorities of missionary discipleship, mixed ecology

and youth and diversity.

The question, ‘Why the fuss?’ also raises global concerns about our relationships within a fractured Communion, along with our wider ecumenical partnerships with the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical and Pentecostal churches – the large majority of the ‘One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church’ worldwide. There are, of course, provinces and churches that have gone further and faster down the track towards equal marriage within their canons and councils: but these are largely confined to Western settings, where the Church is currently very weak (other than its financial muscle), with the accelerated numerical decline in every province and denomination that has embarked on that course demonstrating a serious misjudgement as to the depth and extent of the division. That is not to glamourise the far more flourishing churches of the Global South, say, nor to deny the need for mutual challenge, not least over homophobic attitudes towards LGBTQI+ people. But such challenge can only take place in the context of warm and secure relationships within the Communion and beyond, whilst recognising too the need for the post-colonial reset of those relationships that IASCUFO has been seeking to achieve.

Meanwhile, the lack of serious engagement with our Anglican colleagues throughout the LLF process, let alone our wider ecumenical partners, has been another discouraging feature of the past few years, as though our embattled but historically significant Church of England can simply go it alone; whilst the current direction of travel, and the anger that accompanies it, is creating the

toughest of environments for any future Archbishop of Canterbury to step into, whether in their national or their global role as *Primus inter Pares* within the Communion.

Chapter 3

As this paper has argued thus far, the next step in the LLF process must be to set it on a proper theological and canonical footing, so as to discern the mind of the Church and the promptings of the Holy Spirit (we pray) through that discernment. Returning to the First Council of Nicaea in this its 1700th anniversary year, both Creed and Canons remain essential for maintaining the truth, unity and discipline of the Church.

The recently mooted idea that the liturgy surrounding a proposed ‘Festival of God the Creator’ should go through the full B2 process whilst the most controversial and divisive liturgy in a generation (or more) should bypass it, highlights the point more starkly, and is extremely hard to defend. There are also severe governance issues surrounding the idea that a thin majority in Synod can simply decide that the ‘mind of the Church’ should be similarly bypassed, against all canonical precedent in matters of this seriousness.

Adopting Canon B2 as the way ahead will next lead to a proper discussion about where we go from here: whether we pause at the place we have reached, with commended Prayers of Love and Faith but no further developments for the time being; whether we find sufficient agreement to inch our way forward; or whether we need to work towards a creative settlement, with the House and College of Bishops holding the tension of that development within their shared, if impaired, life together. Whatever option we come up with here, of course, will need to be deeply bathed in prayer and the most careful pastoral handling in matters which touch our human experience quite so deeply and personally. It will also need to recognise that these are issues we have debated for decades, giving

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us a realism about their significance and sensitivity.

Should we opt for the settlement approach, discussions will then need to take place as to the nature and cost of what is envisaged but will do so on the basis of a new realism, given the need for a *negotiated* solution not an *imposed* one. This paper is not the place to suggest just where those conversations might lead, except to point out that the Church of England has a long history of responding to deep division, and needs to learn from that history – both the times when the Church has *failed* to accommodate the needs of the substantial minority (as with the tragic departure of the Methodist movement in the 1790s) and the times when she has largely succeeded in doing so.

There is much that we take for granted about some of the accommodations that have previously been made to resolve the difficulties or tensions of the past, given that many are deeply rooted in our history as a Church. We are used to the idea, for example, of having two provinces within the Church of England, linked by a joint legislative body, and even to the idea of two Anglican provinces covering the same region, as with the Diocese in Europe. We are accustomed to royal peculiars and monastic communities with episcopal visitors, who may or may not be bishops within the diocese in which the community is placed. We take for granted that area and suffragan bishops share substantially in the *episcopate* of the Diocesan: indeed, the institution of suffragan bishops in the Church of England reaches right back to the Suffragan Bishops Act of 1534 and belongs to a tradition much older than that. And we are used to societies and networks within the Church, both formal and informal,

and to the idea that bishops might belong to them alongside their broader diocesan duties.

Other provinces within the Anglican Communion have developed their flexibility further. The Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia, for example, has created a three-person primacy based on different cultural streams – though their radicalism fell short of using that model to help resolve their sexuality debate, so resulting in the loss of some of their most youthful and energetic congregations. Meanwhile discussions surrounding the ordination of women to the episcopate led to the Church of England adopting similarly radical measures, on grounds that are well-articulated in GS Misc. 1406: to quote from that paragraph:

'In papers leading up to the settlement over the ordination of women as bishops, it was openly admitted that what was being proposed had less ecclesiological coherence than more consistent (and stark) alternatives... Introducing impaired communion into the episcopate would undermine, to a degree at least, episcopal collegiality and thereby compromise a basic tenet of Anglican (catholic) ecclesiology. Similarly, parishes' ability to petition for and receive extended episcopal oversight at least qualifies the historic understanding of mono-episcopacy and the identity of the geographical diocese. These ecclesiological anomalies could only be avoided however either by not admitting women into episcopal orders or by de facto expelling traditionalists; and both of those alternatives were considered intolerable by majorities in the House of Bishops and Synod as a whole'.⁷

Each of these precedents has its areas of complexity and sacrifice, and this paper (I repeat) is not designed to prejudge the outcome of any settlement agreement – though I, for one, would wish to explore the idea of ‘three spaces’ further, which emerged from the Leicester working groups but was never properly fleshed out. Should the Church decide that a settlement is the right way to proceed, though, it should first be agreed:

- That clarity will be essential to any final proposal, especially in areas such as safeguarding and finance.
- That any arrangement will need to be secured with proper legal backing, given the trust deficit and its impact on vocations in particular, rather than being either discretionary or temporary.
- That any discussion ‘*must proceed from the basis of acknowledging and accepting that, for a large proportion of those who disagree, the disagreement is of first- or second-order significance*’⁸, and
- That every effort should be made towards ‘*cultivating unity as far as possible, enabling as many as possible to stay within the Church of England, and equipping the Church’s mission to the nation*’⁹ -

even if that requires further ‘ecclesiological anomalies’ along the way.

Finally, those who have argued for Canon B2 have regularly been accused of wanting to sabotage LLF or kick it into the long grass – and there will be some for whom that is true. But for many, the motivation is not sabotage but an essential reset, in line with Jesus’ parable in Luke 14:28-30:

‘For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, “This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.”’

It seems to many, at least, that this is where the LLF process has gone wrong: that skirting around our commitment to discern the mind of the Church has not provided us with any real attempt to plan together and estimate both the scale and the cost of whatever is decided before the foundations are laid and the building built. And the danger of simply pursuing the same course regardless is precisely laid out in the parable, as the tower proves an eyesore (from whichever angle you look at it), and the result is widespread ridicule. It may take a little more time to do this properly: but how essential that we do so, especially given that the task in hand is not so much the building of a tower but rather a tending to the wellbeing of the Body of Christ.

Endnotes

¹Roughly translated as ‘The law of what is prayed is the law of what is believed’ – the principle that our prayers must articulate our doctrine.

²‘Adiaphora’ are matters not regarded as essential to Christian teaching, but practices that are permissible for Christians or allowed by the church – what we might dub ‘inessentials’, where Christians can easily agree to disagree.

³It is hard to refute that simply bringing together Canon B30 on the Church’s doctrine of marriage with Canon C4(2) on Clergy Conduct makes this point clearly.

⁴The famous threefold test of Catholic orthodoxy expressed by St. Vincent of Lérins in around 434 AD.

⁵See for example Cyprian Epistle 67:3 and Augustine: Ad Catholicos Fratres Liber Unos chapter 28.

⁶Hooker: Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity Book III i.10

⁷Paragraph 154 of GS Misc. 1406

⁸GS Misc 1406, para.139.

⁹GS Misc. 1406, paragraph 102.

About the Author



The Rt Revd Andrew Watson became the 10th Bishop of Guildford in 2015. Along with his work in the diocese he has variously chaired the Panel of World Mission and the Anglican Communion, the Ordained Vocations Working Group and the Church of England Governance Project. He joined the House of Lords in February 2022, where he is especially focused on issues of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

