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THE BISHOP OF COVENTRY

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## To All Clergy and Readers

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I write to you as pastors. I know your faith and love and hope in Christ – our way, truth and life. I know your commitment to the people of this land whom you serve, especially those who are drawn to the life of the Church and all those who are in need. I know your heart for each person to enter more fully into the life Jesus offers to us, a quality of life lived together that he calls abundant and that flows from the truth Jesus tells and the way that he shows.

The papers for the February Session of the General Synod have now been published. They include the long-awaited response of the Bishops of the Church of England to *Living in Love and Faith*. You can read it here <https://tinyurl.com/ytrbness> and <https://tinyurl.com/4kwmyvdt>. As we say in our Pastoral Letter, a milestone has been reached. I am writing to you now with my own assessment of where we are, and my views on it.

I believe that what the bishops have put before Synod can be described as a form of 'differentiated consensus'<sup>1</sup>, that has an authentically Anglican character to it. Let's be clear at the outset, the bishops are by no means agreed among themselves about all sorts of important areas touched upon by LLF. Here we simply reflect the range of views within the life of the Church as a whole. We are disciples with you, though we seek, by the grace of God, to be bishops for you, to serve you for the good of God's Church and the life of God's kingdom. Nevertheless, as our learning and growing, our discussing and debating, our deliberating and deciding progressed, we found ourselves at a point where there was sufficient agreement – a *differentiated consensus* – to move forward together. It revolved around four areas.

First, that because the gospel is for everyone, and Jesus died for all, we want to demonstrate that the Church of England is a spiritual home to all who turn to it and that we recognise that this has not always been the experience of LGBTQI+ people, both those who already know, love and seek to follow Christ but also to those who do not, and are searching for him.

Although there are some differences of views over exactly how we enact that commitment for everyone to feel and to be included fully in the life of the Church, there is no equivocation in our

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<sup>1</sup> This is a term used by the late Pope Benedict. He applied it to the historic agreement between the Roman Catholic Church and Lutheran World Federation expressed in their Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1999) where, remarkably, they found common ground between them in their different formulations of the gospel of grace on which they could stand together. They have been joined by three other world communions of churches, including the Anglican Communion who have formally aligned themselves with the Declaration.

readiness to say, as we do in our Letter, 'For the times we have rejected or excluded you – LGBTQI+ people – and those you love, we are deeply sorry'.

Second, that the Church of England's received understanding of marriage as set out in our canons and authorised liturgies, remains. As we know, some bishops have come to believe that the doctrine and practice of marriage should be developed or extended to include same-sex unions. Others, the majority (including me), are not persuaded by those arguments and remain convinced that 'holy matrimony', to use the words of the Prayer Book, is the joining together of a man and a woman in 'an honourable estate, instituted of God . . . adorned beautified' by Christ and 'commended by St Paul'.

Third, that, notwithstanding the distinctiveness of holy matrimony between a man and a woman, there are goods or virtues, to be found in committed same-sex relationships and that it is proper for those to be acknowledged, marked and, *in some way*, affirmed in the pastoral practice of the Church. Furthermore, it is right to give thanks in prayer for all that is good in the love and care of those of those who dedicate themselves to each other and to pray that they will be strengthened in God's love and – to use the wording of one of the prayers – 'share in the blessings of God's kingdom'.

It is here, around the language of thanksgiving, dedication and especially blessing, that the differentiation in the consensus becomes more marked. Some would want to say more, and some would want to say less than the prayers before us. Nevertheless, there is a will among the bishops to find the sort of pastoral response that, while not undermining the received doctrine of marriage, would at the same time affirm all that is good in the commitment and dedication of two people of the same sex to each other.

Fourth, that every effort needs to be made to maintain 'the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (Ephesians 4.3). As bishops we have been on journey to know each other more truly and to find ways of holding our life together in the life of Christ. At times it has been costly. We want to lead the whole Church on that same journey, a journey deeper into Christ, in whom 'all things hold together' (Colossians 1.17).

There is a strong consensus here, together with a strong desire and a readiness to make a concerted effort to ensure that the theological differentiation around the second and third areas of consensus I've described above, do not lead to a serious practical differentiation in our common life, structures and witness.

As the Pastoral Letter concludes, the bishops say, 'What we must do is create a generous space for the Holy Spirit to fill as we stay faithful to Christ, rooted and grounded in the love of God'. I believe that the bishops' response to *Living in Love and Faith* set out in the papers before Synod, provides the basis for that generous space. In one sense, no one will be happy with it, and there will be those who say it is an unhappy compromise. Many of you, I know, will be disappointed in some way by what is proposed. Though there are things that I would have put somewhat differently in the Response, including the prayers, and would be glad of further refinement, I think it represents a genuinely Christian attempt to 'look to . . . the interests of others' (Philippians 2.4) and an authentically Anglican approach (of which there are many examples in our history) to provide a pastoral framework in which all can serve and, common ground on broad but sensitive liturgical provision.

There is much more I would like to say but this letter is already a long one. So at this point let me simply say that I hope you will prayerfully engage with the material, seeking to form your own opinion of it, and to do so with a generosity of heart. Please ask yourself whether there is common ground on which we can stand together despite our differences of views.

When I write to you on matters of such importance, I show drafts to colleagues and every time I benefit from their advice. I have not done so this time. I did not want others, especially colleagues in the Bishop's Core Staff Team, to bear any responsibility for my comments; and I thought you deserved to hear my own voice and mind, even at the risk of causing effects I had not foreseen and did not mean in what I've said, how I have said it and in what I have failed to say.

As I pray for you, I ask you to pray for me.

With my love in Christ

As ever, yours,

+ Christopher