

## **Precis of the PCC's Discussion February 15<sup>th</sup> 2023**

### **Opening Prayers**

Rev Simon opened the meeting in prayer.

### **1 Context.**

Rev Simon gave some context as to why the issue of same-sex marriage had come to dominate the national Church agenda in recent weeks. This involved outlining the *Living in Love and Faith* (LLF) process, and its culmination in the most recent meeting of the general synod.

### **2 Discussion.**

In advance of the meeting Rev. Simon had circulated an email, (see appendix 1) which included links to the written exchange between Bishop Steven Croft and Rev. Vaughn Roberts on same-sex marriage. The merits of both essays were discussed by the PCC, and it was acknowledged that the exchange between the two clergymen has been the best example so far of what the archbishop of Canterbury had meant by the term "good disagreement."

### **3 Prayers of Love and Faith**

The PCC were supplied with a copy of the motion, with its various amendments, that had been passed at the most recent meeting of the general synod. (see appendix 2) Rev. Simon gave particular attention to the pledge made by the House of Bishops to draft new pastoral guidance which is to replace *Issues of Human Sexuality*. *Issues* has been a controversial document, not least because of its perceived intrusiveness into the private life of same-sex attracted ordinands and clergy. Rev. Simon commented on the enormity of the task set before Bishop Sarah Mullaly, bishop of London, with whom this task rests. He mentioned that any replacement document was unlikely to be substantially different from its predecessor, given that the formal doctrine of the Church of England on marriage remains unchanged. Rev Simon said he would report back to the PCC the outcomes of July's general synod.

Conversation moved to the *Prayers of Love and Faith*, a suite of liturgical resources to be commended at the next meeting of the general synod. The advance paperwork, together with the debates at February's general synod, confirmed that the House of Bishops' intention was that these prayers are:

- to be used at the discretion of the minister.
- intended to be offered to individuals who have entered into a civil same-sex marriage.
- to be prayers for, rather than a proclamation of, God's blessing.
- to be offered for the individuals and not the civil institution into which they have entered.
- predicated on the legal distinction between Holy Matrimony and civil marriage.

Rev Simon explained that these fine distinctions have caused great distress to proponents on both side of the debate, which has given rise to the expression that these prayers have "simultaneously gone too far, and yet for others, not far enough." It was commented that the bishops are nonetheless seeking to find a compromise, inelegant as that may be. Others mentioned that the very nature of these issues mean that no such compromise may be possible.

Rev. Simon pointed out that the final amendment to the motion (see appendix 2) means the draft prayers now require significant revision, since they must not be used in a way that is at all suggestive of a departure from the official doctrine of the Church of England. This will require serious reflection on the part of the liturgical commission, who will be editing the prayers between now and July. Nonetheless, when the prayers are finally commended by the general synod, Rev. Simon would write to the wider parish outlining his own position.

#### **4 Consideration.**

The majority of our discussion was spent reflecting on what it means for St Paul's to lead well at parish level during such a polarising national debate. It was evident that the council, and no doubt the wider parish,

has strong feelings on both side of the debate. Rather than seek to ignore this, the PCC were unanimous that this was something St Paul's should seek to embrace. As a church of a broad evangelical tradition, we should acknowledge that there will always be a diversity of views within our fellowship. Rev. Simon, reflecting on the longer history of St Paul's, noted that its distinctive ministry to the town and deanery was that it had been intentional about representing a *via media*, a middle way, in which complex matters were held in tension, and in all good conscience. To this end, the vicar made clear that however public the debate may become in the mainstream media, no one at St Paul's is to be denied access to the sacraments on the basis of their sexuality. No one is to be excluded from either Holy Baptism, or Holy Communion, on the basis of their sexuality.

## **5 Holy Communion**

As a symbol of the PCC's determination to work generously with difference, the evening concluded with an act of Holy Communion.

## **APPENDIX 1 VICAR'S PREPARATORY EMAIL AHEAD OF FEBRUARY'S PCC**

*Dear brothers and sisters,*

*Please do give yourself sufficient time to read through these preliminary remarks ahead of our next PCC meeting, where we will be discussing the Church of England's teaching on marriage.*

*This is a contentious issue and has not always been handled well at the national level. We begin, therefore, by acknowledging that both the sense of conviction, and the sense of hurt, that people carry into these debates are equally real and equally deep. Knowing our PCC as I do, I expect that ours will be a gracious and good-natured exchange. I imagine there will be a range of opinion on these matters. The purpose of our discussion is not to label one another with terms such as "revisionist" or "traditionalist", but instead, to think about what it means for us at parish level to lead well, at a time when (quite frankly) we are not seeing the best of the national church. In advance of our meeting, please prayerfully consider what you wish to contribute to this meeting, which will conclude with an act of Holy Communion, as a reminder of the One whose love unites us.*

### **Agenda**

*I wish to keep the agenda clear of the usual business items and devote the time instead to reflecting on the Living in Love and Faith process. Given the extraordinary nature of this meeting, I suggest that all regular business (where possible) be managed by email correspondence. Where this is impossible, it should be delegated to the standing committee.*

*By the time we gather in mid-February, General Synod will have met and received from the House of Bishops the Prayers of Love and Faith, a suite of liturgical resources which offer prayers of blessing for same-sex couples. The draft prayers are in the public domain, and may be found here:*

*<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-01///FINAL%20Draft%20Prayers%20of%20Love%20and%20Faith.pdf>*

*You should be aware that there is a great feeling of discontent, from both sides of the debate, about the outcomes of the LLF process. It is therefore hard to know what will happen at General Synod, which convenes the 6th to the 9th of Feb.*

### **Preparation for the Meeting**

While the full LLF report can be found online<sup>[1]</sup>, I said I would provide some more focussed reading in advance of February's PCC which attempts to model what the archbishop of Canterbury termed good disagreement.

In November of last year, the bishop of Oxford +Steven Croft, wrote an open letter to his diocese. In this letter he outlined his own position, advocating a change in the Church's doctrine of marriage. In response to this, a vicar within that diocese, Rev. Vaughan Roberts of St Ebbe's Oxford, wrote a piece defending the Church's current teaching, that marriage is the lifelong union of one man and one woman. This is perhaps the most gracious exchange so far between two people who profoundly disagree with one another on the issue. As a mark of mutual respect, these two interlocutors both invited the other to proofread their own work before it was published.

I would kindly ask that you read BOTH pieces, rather than the one which will only serve to bolster your current perspective.

You can find Bishop Steven Croft's statement here:

<https://d3hgrrlq6yacptf.cloudfront.net/61f2fd86f0ee5/content/pages/documents/together-in-love-and-faith.pdf>

You can find Rev. Vaughan Roberts' response here:

[https://2713aced-d665-4866-bcd0-8f7d81f2f5fe.usfiles.com/ugd/2713ac\\_4f9a3958db324778b807e9507fb7c](https://2713aced-d665-4866-bcd0-8f7d81f2f5fe.usfiles.com/ugd/2713ac_4f9a3958db324778b807e9507fb7c)

There is of course plenty more to read on the subject, so if you have an appetite for further reading, I commend the following exchange between Bishop John Inge, and Rev. Dr Ian Paul, a New Testament specialist. +John's piece can be found here:

<https://www.cofe-worcester.org.uk/news/an-open-letter-from-bishop-john.php>

Rev. Dr. Ian Paul's response can be found here:

<https://anglican.ink/2023/01/16/an-open-letter-to-john-inge-bishop-of-worcester-on-sexuality-and-marriage/>

## **The Objective**

The purpose of our conversation is NOT to sign a resolution or statement of any kind at this meeting. Nor is it to come to a consensus view one way or the other. Instead, it is about beginning the honest process of listening to one another and discerning how we can model gracious and generous leadership going forward.

*Our concern must always be for the people of St Paul's Beckenham, whom we love and represent. What has hit the national press has been extremely polarising. Our goal is to consider what it means for St Paul's to be a place of welcome and faithful witness, which protects and honours the dignity of all who seek to meet with God in our wonderful church space.*

*In regard to the use or non-use of any newly commissioned liturgies rests **solely with the vicar**. I will in due course communicate my own convictions to the wider parish when it seems wise to do so.*

### **The Wider Context - Discretion**

*While I trust you will be discerning of what you see and read in the news, it is true that there is a collective sense of disappointment with the House of Bishops. This is felt on both sides of the debate. The LLF process was undertaken in good faith, and the way the Bishops' report was leaked to the press before its official publication has undermined that sense of trust, and sabotaged the platform from which the conversation was to be carried forward. I too share this frustration. We have not been led by example on this point, and we as a PCC must act with greater discretion for the sake of Christ's fold entrusted to our care.*

### **The Cost**

*I am anticipating that this will be a gracious, sensitive, and loving exchange. But I am keenly aware that these issues do not touch our lives with equal force. As we give thought to our wider fellowship there are those for whom reflection on these matters will be far more costly than will it be for others. Through its history St Paul's has been a refuge in the community for those who never felt like they could quite 'fit in.' **This will continue to be the case**. If nothing else, our role as a PCC is to protect the fellowship from the furore of what hits the national press, and conduct our conversations in a way that models salt and light to our congregation.*

### **The Boundaries**

*I have submitted a provisional agenda below. But as with any debate or exchange, it is helpful and healthy to know where and what the boundaries are. In all honesty, I imagine our exchange will be comparatively gentle, and warm.*

*Nonetheless, the bottom line is:*

*No one is to be excluded from receiving the sacraments of the Church on the basis of their sexuality. No one is to be excluded from Holy Baptism, nor from Holy Communion, on the basis of their sexuality.*

*While there is a good deal more to be said, this is the guiding principle which will shape our discussion.*

*Yours in Christ Rev. Simon*

## **APPENDIX 2**

### **MOTION PASSED AT FEBRUARY'S GENERAL SYNOD**

That this Synod, recognising the commitment to learning and deep listening to God and to each other of the Living in Love and Faith process, and desiring with God's help to journey together while acknowledging the different deeply held convictions within the Church:

- (a) lament and repent of the failure of the Church to be welcoming to LGBTQI+ people and the harm that LGBTQI+ people have experienced and continue to experience in the life of the Church;
- (b) recommit to our shared witness to God's love for and acceptance of every person by continuing to embed the Pastoral Principles in our life together locally and nationally;
- (c) commend the continued learning together enabled by the Living in Love and Faith process and resources in relation to identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage;
- (d) welcome the decision of the House of Bishops to replace Issues in Human Sexuality with new pastoral guidance;
- (e) welcome the response from the College of Bishops and look forward to the House of Bishops further refining, commending and issuing the Prayers of Love and Faith described in GS 2289 and its Annexes;
- (f) invite the House of Bishops to monitor the Church's use of and response to the Prayers of Love and Faith, once they have been commended and published, and to report back to Synod in five years' time.
- (g) endorse the decision of the College and House of Bishops not to propose any change to the doctrine of marriage, and their intention that the final version of the Prayers of Love and Faith should not be contrary to or indicative of a departure from the doctrine of the Church of England