

**LLF - 10 February 2023**

**Bishop Karen**

As a member of the national Next Steps Group it has been my privilege to walk alongside bishop colleagues and participants as we have together discerned what we believe God to be saying to our Church today.

Living in Love and Faith has been a significant undertaking. After the publication of the key resources, all churches were invited to engage with them, and to share together our understanding of scripture, our Anglican tradition and our personal experience. That has meant being vulnerable with one another, about our identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage.

I have observed that for many in our churches, coming from a married perspective it has been much easier to talk about views on the spaces that other people occupy. However, for those of us who are not married, whether single, celibate, widowed, gay, same sex attracted or trans, that has not been easy. Hearing those stories however has been significant because God calls each of us by name, loves us, and welcomes us as the father welcomed the prodigal son.

During the LLF journey people have been honest about their feelings of inclusion and exclusion, their feelings of being misunderstood. The traditional doctrine of marriage as the church has understood it has been challenged, and there has been acknowledgement that we can all hold true to scripture but can come to genuine different understandings of it.

Despite governmental changes in introducing Civil Partnerships and Same Sex Civil Marriage, a document 'Issues in Human Sexuality' written over 30 years ago is still used by the church to make sure that all those who are not married and who seek ordination, hold to the churches traditional teaching. This document created different rules for lay and ordained, for those who are married and those who are not and has led to inconsistencies over time. For example clergy are currently permitted to enter into a Civil Partnership but not a same-sex marriage.

This inconsistency, and perhaps injustice, continues in our churches. As parish churches clergy have to marry those who live in the parish, even though couples may have had umpteen relationships in the past, or we know full well that people have been in an active sexual relationships for years, or whose marriages have failed, however clergy cannot marry, bless or even openly pray for same sex couples who may have been together in a committed, permanent and

stable relationship for 10, 20, 30 even 50 years.

In reading people's responses to engaging with LLF, whether in focus groups, written questionnaires and art, it was clear that the church cannot stay where it is. We are a 21<sup>st</sup> century church, and whilst remaining committed to the essentials of faith - the Book of Common Prayer, the Bible, tradition and reason, we need to be able to respond to a 21<sup>st</sup> century world as God would want us to. God's love is not exclusive, we minister to all people, and the Body of Christ is bigger than those who worship in a particular place.

So, we bishops, in taking what we have heard and our own experiences, needed to come up with a way, where we could rethink our current teaching in line with government changes, retain good doctrine and continue to walk together as a Church of England. Bishops do not all agree on same sex marriage, and the majority do not wish at this time to change the traditional view of Holy Matrimony as being between one man and one woman. However, we need to be the Church of England in England where civil marriage is open to men and women, and same sex couples.

As the church introduced a long time ago prayers after a civil marriage, the bishops wanted a way to affirm and acknowledge, dedicate and some to bless all those who seek to live in love and faith, who have found love and friendship with someone of the same sex, and who seek God's presence in that relationship within the fellowship of the church. I don't think I am alone in feeling that the church should have done this when Civil partnerships were introduced, but better late than never.

There will be no compulsion to use these prayers. We each pray to God what we can pray in all integrity, and I hope that in many of our churches, when a same sex couple make an approach, these agreed resources will be considered and used to articulate our hopes that God may be in that relationship, that it may be a source of strength to the couple and to others.

I bring into that space, those who have been in a relationship for many years, who have entered into a civil partnership, which they have converted into marriage, and who long for some affirmation in their local church.

I bring into that space those same sex couples who feel that what they have is different from marriage and who enjoy living in a civil partnership faithfully and who want God's blessing on the life-long commitment they have made.

I bring into that space those who feel blessed by a friendship, which has brought companionship to who may wish to one day celebrate that covenanted relationship in church.

I bring into that space an opposite sex couple who have been friends a long time, and who continue to live apart and who may wish to celebrate what is precious to them.

This is much more than same sex marriage, this is about affirming life giving relationships for all those who may have felt excluded up to now. This is about acceptance of everyone regardless of their gender or identity, this is about honouring people's intention to live in love and faith, including also of course those who are same sex attracted but have chosen not to form close relationships of those of the same sex, those who committed to the consecrated single life, or to celibacy, both publicly or privately.

Despite what we hear, this is not all about sex, but about committed relationships, lived in God's light and love.

There are those who want the church to embrace same sex marriage. That would require a change of doctrine and new liturgies, at the current time the majority of bishops and the majority of General Synod would not agree to such a move. There are those on the other end of the argument who would have liked that because the church would then have to move in two directions, where either the more conservative, or the more liberal, could have their own oversight or their own province.

As bishops we however stand united because in many of our churches there are people, as the LLF process has shown, with many different views, we represent local communities full of people who are not all like us and I for one don't want us to pull apart.

We are united in our apology to LGBTQ+ people whom we have not listened to, who we have rejected as a church, who we have not affirmed and welcomed as we should, and we are united in our wanting to continue on a journey of understanding, as there is so much we still need to understand how to manage best issues of identity within our society, our schools and churches.

We stand united in offering prayers, and my own feeling is as we current bless objects, flags and battle ships, why not also permanent, stable and faithful same sex relationships, and we stand united as bishops in producing new pastoral guidance on what is considered a holy life for all clergy, and those seeking ordination. I hope too that such guidance also helps all of us discern what is Godly intent and Godly living, what is meant by life in all its fullness, in a way that is counter-

cultural to a secular world that often celebrates promiscuity through its media, pornography on the internet and quick divorces.

As with the re-marriage of divorcees, it will be for each church and clergy to decide how it welcomes those who have felt excluded up to now, some churches may openly advertise their inclusive nature, others may be open to responding pastorally to those who approached them, others may not in all conscience be able to affirm some relationships. That is all ok.

I hope that these resources will help us as a church navigate our way through some of the complexities of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and respond in a pastoral way to those who come honestly and sincerely seeking Christ, and will honour all those seeking to live lives of love and faith.

I hope too that following the Synod decision the Church will have a Christ like heart for the Church to be a place where outsiders, the excluded, the lonely can find fellowship, where all belong. That we can find a way to remain united, regardless of our differences, to be a witness to a divided world.