

Living in Love and Faith

What is this all about?

This was a process initiated by the Bishops in 2017 to discuss issues of identity, sexuality and marriage in light of strong disagreement within the Church of England about what is acceptable for Christians in this area. The process finished last year, and the Bishops then made recommendations to the General Synod (the governing body of the Church of England) in February this year.

What was the outcome of the General Synod?

The Synod discussed and ultimately agreed the Bishops' proposals. In brief, the most relevant parts of what the Synod agreed are that the Church of England would repent of its failure to be welcoming to LGBTQI+ people; agree that the Bishops should write new pastoral guidance about issues of human sexuality (replacing previous guidance); and welcome the Bishops' *'Prayers of Love and Faith'* with further refinement.

Before the vote was taken, various amendments to these proposals were suggested. Many of these were simply rejected by the Bishops themselves. However, one amendment made it through and was ultimately written into the agreed outcome of the Synod. This amendment (amendment (g)) states that the Bishops will not, "*propose any change to the doctrine of marriage*" and 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.*"

Why is this controversial?

This depends on your point of view. The proposals, and particularly amendment (g), has upset people who want to change the Church of England's doctrine of marriage to include gay marriage.

The controversial part of this agreement for those who hold to an orthodox (i.e. the historic) understanding of marriage and acceptable sexual practice for Christians are the *Prayers of Love and Faith*. These prayers can be used within a church service (or elsewhere) when "*two people who love one another...wish to give thanks for and mark that love in faith before God.*"

The draft prayers shown to the February Synod (which will now be revised alongside new pastoral guidance as above) gave the impression of blessing sexual relationships in which the couple involved are not married (whether opposite or same sex). They were also taken to bear a striking resemblance to a marriage service (including prayers that the couple would be dedicated and devoted to each other to dwell together till the end of their lives, promises made by the couple to each other, prayers about the rings the couple are wearing etc.)

This concern was heightened by statements made by certain bishops when they were explaining the proposals. In particular, the Archbishop of York and the Bishop of London seemed to acknowledge that these prayers could be used to bless couples who are in sexual relationships even though they are not married, including same sex couples.

This is held to be a departure from the Church's doctrine of marriage in practise, even if it is claimed that the doctrine has not changed in theory.

Other elements of controversy around this included:

1. That the Church appears to be saying two conflicting things about sex and marriage.
2. That the *Prayers* would function as one step along the road that leads to a complete change in the Church's understanding of marriage and acceptable sexual practice.
3. That the Bishops' proposals rely on strange concepts that are hard to accept. These include a distinction between ministers offering a prayer asking *for* God's blessing and a prayer *of* God's blessing (which are held to be different), and a claim that we can bless individuals in a relationship but not the relationship itself. If you are confused by this, you understand the controversy.
4. Creating a new distinction between civil marriage (i.e. marriage by the State) and Holy Matrimony (marriage in church). This appears to create two, separate forms of marriage. This could mean that people who were married outside Church would no longer be considered married by the Church. Such an understanding is entirely new.
5. Creating a new concept called 'covenanted friendship' or 'covenanted companionship' in which two people make "*a formal commitment to deep and lasting friendship*". This appears to have come out of the desire to show that the *Prayers* do not indicate a new type of marriage, but only a celebration of various relationships. This could commit Church of England ministers to engage in endless special services whose purpose is unclear and further undermine the unique place marriage previously held.
6. That the decision about using these *Prayers* is delegated to an individual vicar's conscience. The Bishops thus passed the responsibility on to a lone person. On top of that, the agreement and statements made by the Bishops would suggest to the public that use of the *Prayers* is completely acceptable *within Christian doctrine*. A lone vicar's decision not to use them would then be seen as a refusal to do something that is acceptable *to the Christian faith*. In this case it might be assumed that, if it is not Christian doctrine stopping the use of the *Prayers*, it must be something nefarious about the individual vicar. This could expose a vicar to incredible controversy both within and outside the parish church.

If you want a further consideration of this, I recommend reading Bishop Christopher Cocksworth's startlingly candid essay, *Living in Love and Faith: Where do Things Stand? Where do we go from here?* published on 21st February 2023.

What happens next?

It is hard to say. The Bishops are producing their pastoral guidance and revised prayers for the July meeting of the General Synod.

It is hard to see how they can manage this and be seen to abide by amendment (g) mentioned above. And then there are legal and other issues relating to the controversies mentioned above.

This means that there is a great deal of debate ahead. As Bishop Christopher Cocksworth said, the next stage "*is likely to be the most difficult.*"

However, if the revised *Prayers* and the new pastoral guidance that the Bishops produce indicate a departure from the historic understanding of marriage and acceptable sexual practise for Christians, and they are approved by the July Synod, there are likely to be significant consequences.