

Paper Adopted by Diocesan Synod - 5th February 2022

On 27th January 2017, the Church of England published paper GS 2055, “Marriage and Same Sex Relationships after the Shared Conversations: A Report from the House of Bishops.” This paper was debated by General Synod on 15th February 2017. General Synod voted against the *Take Note* motion. Consequently the paper was not received. Following that debate, the Archbishop of Canterbury issued the following statement,

“No person is a problem or an issue. People are made in the image of God. All of us, without exception, are loved and called by Christ. There are no “problems”, there are simply people.

“How we deal with the real and profound disagreement – put so passionately and so clearly by many at the C of E’s General Synod debate on marriage and same sex relationships today – is the challenge we face as people who all belong to Christ.

“To deal with that disagreement, to find ways forward, we need a radical new Christian inclusion in the Church. This must be founded in scripture, in reason, in tradition, in theology; it must be based on good, healthy, flourishing relationships, and in a proper 21st century understanding of being human and of being sexual.

“We need to work together – not just the bishops but the whole Church, not excluding anyone – to move forward with confidence.

“The vote today is not the end of the story, nor was intended to be. As bishops we will think again and go on thinking, and we will seek to do better. We could hardly fail to do so in the light of what was said this afternoon. The way forward needs to be about love, joy and celebration of our humanity; of our creation in the image of God, of our belonging to Christ – all of us, without exception, without exclusion”.

As a result of the above, the C of E spent two years producing materials under the title of Living in Love and Faith. The stated purpose of these materials was to produce resources designed to encourage and enable engagement and learning in a variety of settings, a church-wide process of learning together, praying together, listening to one another and listening to God as part of a process of discerning a way forward for the Church of England in relation to matters of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. The resources were published in October 2020.

As General Synod prepares to discuss these issues again in 2022, we are now being asked to offer feedback to the National Church. A good number of local churches and deaneries in the diocese have engaged with the LLF resources. A number of local churches and individuals have, of course, thought through these issues in their own ways and with their

own materials. The intended purpose of Church's LLF conversations in the last fourteen months has not been to reduce these complex issues to simplistic binary discussions which would inevitably be divisive. Rather it has been about the much more demanding process of developing self-awareness, serious listening, empathetic understanding and nuanced learning. We are not therefore being asked by the National Church to submit a simple view from the Diocese of Chichester of whether the Church of England should affirm its inherited understanding of these issues or explore revision. We are being asked to contribute perspectives and experiences from interacting and praying with others; We are being asked to contribute our learning about the way scripture speaks to us; we are being asked to contribute reflections on the Church's mission in its current cultural context; we are being asked to give a snapshot of these things in this current moment that will inform our General Synod representatives and the conversations they will be involved with. This is not a process designed to pursue a particular agenda or to change anybody's mind.

Section One gives results from the survey we sent around the diocese in October this year. Section Two gives some reflection and conclusions.

Section One

- i. A total of 1400 responses from a worshipping population of about 28,000 indicates that about 5% of Anglicans in the diocese responded to this survey. It is very difficult to say if these 1400 responders were a typical cross section of Anglicans in the diocese of Chichester. However, the fact that half the responders thought that these issues were of great importance in the life of the Church suggests that they represent those who feel strongly about these matters, or those who feel most directly impacted by issues of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage.

- ii. Total responders - 1400
Total lay responders – 1170
Total clergy responders – 220
Blanks - 10

- iii. *Age Profiles*

65yrs	764
55-64yrs	334
45 – 54yrs	152
35-44yrs	104
25-34yrs	27
18-25yrs	7

- iv. *Engagement with Living in Love and Faith Material*

508 responders had either read the LLF book or been on an LLF course or both.
884 had no engagement with LLF material.
(Anecdotally it is probably true to say that more than 508 have engaged with LLF material.)

v. *Do you consider matters of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage to be of great importance in the life of the church or lesser importance?*

704 people responded that these were very important issues

427 people responded that these were moderately important issues

158 people responded that these were moderately less important issues

118 people responded that these were less important issues.

vi. *Would you describe yourself as familiar with what the Bible says on these issues?*

751 described themselves as extremely or very familiar (236 and 514 respectively)

517 described themselves as somewhat familiar

98 described themselves as not so familiar

24 described themselves as not at all familiar.

vii. *Would you describe yourself as familiar with the Church's inherited teaching on these issues?*

752 described themselves as extremely or very familiar (218 and 534 respectively)

477 described themselves as somewhat familiar

133 described themselves as not so familiar

27 described themselves as not at all familiar.

Of the 752 responder who were extremely or very familiar with the Church's inherited position:

318 responders (42%) also expressed a preference for affirming the Church's inherited position

214 responders (28%) also expressed a preference for some revision of the Church's inherited position.

viii. *Would you describe yourself as familiar with emerging Christian view on these issues?*

486 described themselves as extremely or very familiar (117 and 369 respectively)

633 described themselves as somewhat familiar

238 described as not so familiar

33 described themselves as not at all familiar.

Of the 486 responders who were extremely or very familiar with these emerging views:

190 (39%) also expressed a preference for affirming the Church's historic position

156 (32%) also expressed a preference for some revision of the Church's historic position.

ix. *Do you find it easy or difficult to have constructive conversations about issues of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage with people who have different opinions and perspectives?*

300 people described these conversations as easy to have.

614 people described these conversations as moderately easy

258 people described these conversations as hard to have

215 people described these as very hard conversations to have.

Of the 914 responders who stated that they find these conversations easy or moderately easy to

have, 314 also expressed a preference for affirming the Church's inherited teaching, and 225

responders indicated a preference for some revision of the Church's inherited teaching.

Of the 463 responders who said that these conversations were difficult or moderately difficult,

104 people expressed a preference for affirming the Church's inherited teaching, and 167

responders expressed a preference for some revision of the Church's inherited teaching.

- x. *Do you hope that the current conversations about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage will lead to an affirmation of the Church's inherited teaching, some revision of it, or further dialogue?*

429 responders indicated a preference for affirming the Church's inherited teaching.

(31%)

391 (28%) responders indicated a preference for some revision of the Church's inherited teaching.

375 responders indicated a desire for further dialogue. (26%)

However, it was possible to indicate more than one preference.

798 responders (57%) indicated a preference for affirming the Church's inherited teaching AND

engaging in further dialogue.

766 responders (54%) indicated a preference for some revision of the Church's teaching AND

engaging in further dialogue.

- xi. *Did different age groups respond in different ways?*

For age group 65yrs+:

50% considered these issues to be important; 40% considered themselves familiar with what the Bible says and also with the Church's inherited teaching; 60% felt unfamiliar with emerging Christian view; 25% preferred an affirmation of the Church's inherited position, rising to 60% when added to a preference for further dialogue.

For age group 45-64yrs:

50% saw these as important issues; 75% considered themselves familiar with what the Bible says; 75% also considered themselves familiar with emerging Christian views; 25% wanted an affirmation of the Churches inherited position and 25% wanted some revision; When added to the preferences for further dialogue, the percentages both rose to 50%.

For age group 25-44yrs:

80% considered this an important issue; 90% considered themselves to be familiar with what the Bible says; 90% considered themselves familiar with emerging Christian views; 50% wanted an affirmation of the Church's inherited position and 60% wanted an

affirmation with further dialogue; 20% wanted some revision of the Church's inherited position.

Age group 18-24yrs:

A tiny sample. 100% stated that this was an important issue; All responders considered themselves very familiar with what the Bible says, with the Church's inherited position and with emerging Christian view; 5 out of seven responders expressed a preference for affirming the Church's inherited position, 2 expressed a preference for some revision.

xii. *Has Engagement with Living in Love and Faith had an impact?*

508 responders had engaged with LLF material.

80% of these responders thought these issues were very or exceedingly important.

90% considered themselves to be very familiar with what the Bible says and with the inherited

position of the Church.

85% were familiar with emerging Christian views.

41% of responders indicated a preference for affirming the Church's inherited position. (compared with 24% of those who had not engaged with any LLF material)

30% of responders indicated a preference for some revision of the inherited position. (compared with 27% of those who had not engaged with any LLF material)

19% of responders indicated a preference for further dialogue.

(compared with 32% of those who had not engaged with any LLF material.)

Of the total responders (1400), 27% of people (375) expressed a sole preference for more

dialogue. This is slightly higher than the preference expressed by people who have engaged in

some way with LLF material. This sample suggests that there is therefore a slightly reduced

appetite for more dialogue among those who have already engaged with LLF material, which is

understandable.

60% (a rise of 19%) of those who have engaged with LLF material indicated a preference BOTH

for affirming the inherited position AND for continuing with dialogue (ticking two boxes), and

50% (also a rise of 20%) indicated a preference for some revision of the inherited position while

continuing with dialogue.

884 people stated that they had had no engagement with LLF material. Of these, 279 (31%)

expressed a preference for dialogue on these issues. While that is 11% higher than those who

have engaged with LLF so far, it is still quite a low percentage from a group who had also expressed a belief that this was an important issue in the life of the Church.

xiii. Does familiarity with what the Bible says impact preferences for future direction?

751 people considered themselves to be extremely or very familiar with what the Bible says.

339 of these people (45%) indicated a preference for affirming the historic position of the Church.

187 of these people (24%) indicated a preference for some revision of the Church inherited position.

222 of these people (30%) indicated a preference for further dialogue.

xiv. Does a belief that these are important issues lead to a desire to explore the issues themselves further?

1131 people stated that these issues were moderately or very important in the life of the Church. Of those, 390 had engaged with LLF material in some way. (It is possible that access to a local course was a factor in this figure).

239 people expressed a preference for some further dialogue on these issues.

Section Two

The following remarks may prove contentious. In the absence of any other collective information, they are an attempt to reflect something of the mood and spectrum of opinions held by Anglicans in the Diocese of Chichester. These comments are certain not the last word on this very sensitive subject.

- i. Issues around identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage are some of the most sensitive, personal and difficult issues to explore. Living in Love and Faith, along with the Pastoral Principles that accompany it, has sought to set a tone for these conversations that is less adversarial than previous debates on this subject. Judging from the cross section of responses, it would appear that although it might be said that the Church has historically been instinctively adversarial on this (and other issues), there is a growing willingness, even a resolve in some quarters, to understand our brothers and sisters in Christ whose opinions are not our own. To be able to listen closely to a perspective at variance from our own without feeling either compromised by it or suspicious of where it might lead, takes some courage. If the current conversation has been fruitful in this respect, it would indicate the start of a new chapter in this process rather than its middle or end.
- ii. This national conversation has taken place in a context of pandemic. Many people have, for good reason, been unwilling to participate in additional group conversations. Some LLF courses have taken place online. Like all other online gatherings, experience suggests that zoom has been more useful for business meetings and less fruitful for discussions that are not primarily about giving information or making decisions. 75 people attended LLF facilitator training sessions

which were also necessarily done online. Six deaneries were not represented in these training sessions. The context of pandemic meant that a great deal of local church and diocesan time has been prioritised towards adapting church life to meet extraordinary and unexpected new demands. As Diocesan Synod members will be aware, the necessary priority in recent months has been the development of mission action plans and deanery audits, and attending to the subsequent financial implications for the diocese that were outlined in the Autumn Deanery Meetings.

- iii. A second context for these conversations has been the increasing need for this and every diocese to respond to a variety of other National Church initiatives, increasingly these initiatives have related to the environment, but other responses have been needed on issues such diversity, outer estates ministry and PCR2. These are all important matters but they have unavoidably competed for attention. In the light of these demands, and in addition to those imposed by the pandemic, the approach in this diocese has been to ask deaneries to highlight and promote Living in Love and Faith, and matters of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage in way that was most appropriate to local context.
- iv. Feedback from those who have participated in an LLF course, or read the LLF book or looked at the LLF video stories online have all been very appreciative of the evident quality of the materials produced and the conversations that were stimulated. It is impossible to please everyone. However, from the feedback received, it would appear in the main that the conversations that have taken place in recent months have been successful in exploring the issues and providing an opportunity for learning from one another, from scripture, and from science.
- v. Cautious hope has been expressed that this process might actually effect change. There is a feeling that we have been having this discussion for a very long time, nothing has changed, and the lived experience of many Christians is still not taken seriously. However, the quality of the resources, the methodology, and the depth of research has kindled some hope that the painful and real experiences of exclusion in the past might not be replayed in the future. Reassurance on this point is needed in the face of anxiety.
- vi. Hope has also been expressed that the Church might reaffirm its inherited understanding of matters concerning identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. In particular there is hope that the LLF conversations might place its main emphasis on scripture and a traditional understanding of scripture. There has been a perception that LLF resources are slightly light on scripture. Genesis chapters 1 and 2, for example, are not mentioned. Some feedback has urged the Church to speak with a clearly prophetic voice into a contemporary culture that is increasingly secular and religiously illiterate. Some anxiety has been expressed that LLF is about softening up the Church of England in order to accept revision of its inherited position. Reassurance on this point is needed in the face of anxiety.
- vii. The obvious point needs to be made that the task of holding these various hopes together has, and will continue to be, hugely demanding. We don't know if it will

actually be possible. Part of this conversation has therefore caused us to ask ourselves how we live with uncertainty. These are passionately held matters of identity. These are hopes sincerely expressed. However, out of 1400 responses to the diocesan survey, only one mentioned the possibility of leaving the Church of England if their hopes were not realised. The survey did not ask the question directly, but the mood of the responses suggested, more or less universally, that a fracture of the Church was desired by nobody.

- viii. The survey suggested that Anglicans in the Diocese of Chichester are nearly evenly split between those wanting to affirm the Church's inherited position on these matters, and those who would like revision of it. The difference between the preferences of these two groups is 3% with those seeking to affirm the Church's inherited position marginally in the larger group. The comments section at the end of the survey suggested that there is a wide spread of opinion about what any such revision might look like. However, the survey also suggested that those preferring affirmation and those preferring revision would very much like to see ongoing discussion and dialogue taking place as well. Only a minority of those preferring affirmation of the Church's historic position or those preferring revision made their preferences without also supporting further dialogue.
- ix. Having said the above, the survey also suggests that there is a limit to the amount of time people will give to discussing these matters. Those who have engaged with LLF material seem less inclined to continue the discussion. This is not a reflection on the quality of the resources which have obviously been highly regarded and well received. Many of the responders' comments recognised that identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage are very significant matters while simultaneously not wanting to perpetuate this discussion indefinitely. This raises the question of whether the current conversations across the Church of England, and particularly in General Synod, will reach any conclusion or whether the proverbial can will be kicked further down the road. This sort of fudge or compromise might lead to disquiet. Pope Francis has said this about compromise, "In the Christian life, when you are seeking God's will, there are no compromise solutions. Does this mean a Christian can never compromise? Of course not; sometimes it's the only thing you can do to avoid a war or some other calamity. But a compromise does not resolve a contradiction or a conflict. In other words, it's a temporary solution, a holding pattern, that allows a situation to mature to the point where it can be resolved by a path of discernment at the right time, seeking God's will." [*Let us Dream*, Pope Francis 2020]
- x. It is very difficult to say with clarity what causes people to respond and make the survey preferences they have. It is very hard to say whether biblical familiarity, or theological thinking, or personal experience, or scientific knowledge leads people to the opinions they have expressed. About half the responders to the survey indicated they were extremely or very familiar with the Bible. And yet the correlation between familiarity with the Bible and a preference for affirming the Church's historic position was not established. However, the correlation between familiarity with the Bible and

a rejection of the preference for revising the Church's current teaching was clearer to see in the survey.

- xi. Neither did the survey provide strong evidence that responders simply sought to affirm the status quo: familiarity with the Church's inherited position did not necessarily lead to acceptance of it. Familiarity with emerging Christian views did not necessarily seem to lead to a preference for adopting those emerging views either. There is some anecdotal evidence in the written survey responses that personal experience of having, for example, a gay family member, does have a bearing on the preferences made in the survey. Although a survey of 1400 people can only lead to suggestions, it may be possible assert what we already really know, namely that human beings are very complex. The survey preferences we make and the opinions we hold are the product of experiences and learning that began in our earliest formative years. We are none of us entirely aware of what motivates our responses. Although this is a truism, it is important to state it as part of this conversation if we are *all* seeking to commit ourselves to a deeper understanding of our identity and our humanity. These comments, of course, place the current conversation in a wider context.
- xii. Part of that wider context, but rather an oblique part of the survey, is an exploration of the corporate dimension of these issues. 65% of the survey responders indicated that they were comfortable talking about these matters with others whose opinions differed from their own. It is to be hoped that this is an indication of willingness to engage and wrestle with diversity, if maybe not to embrace it. However, of the 914 people who indicated that they found this subject easy or moderately easy to talk about, 315 (34%) expressed a preference for affirming the Church's inherited teaching, and 225 (25%) expressed a preference for some revision of the Church's inherited teaching. And equally, of the 463 who said that they found these conversations difficult or moderately difficult, 104 (22%) expressed a preference for affirming the Church's inherited teaching and 167 (36%) expressed a preference for some revision. The implication is that those who expressed a preference for some revision of inherited teaching also find this issue more difficult to talk about. Anecdotally, we are aware of one church in the diocese that was unwilling to ask its members for contributions to the survey on the grounds that it would cause unnecessary upset and distress. It is possible that the voice of those preferring revision of the Church's inherited teaching is the quieter voice. The relationship between personal identity and the Body of Christ possibly requires further theological treatment, as does the theological limits of diversity.
- xiii. These themes are picked up in the fifth session of the LLF course, "Life Together." The course book says: *What behaviour, what forms of relationship, what patterns of obedience and community life reflect God's character and love? When it comes to questions of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage we have different views about these things. That is not surprising because the Church reflects both the diversity and fallenness of God's creation. Our differences put a strain on the 'genuine mutual love' – the unity – to which the Church is called. Sometimes, this strain is because we struggle to live well with those who are different from us.*

Sometimes it's because we're all sinful and behave badly. In this course we have reflected on how we act out of fear or prejudice; how we are hypocritical, saying one thing and doing another; how we misuse our power by silencing people; how, by failing to listen, we can be ignorant about others or not even notice them. But sometimes, it's because we disagree sincerely about what God wants. We disagree about which patterns of life, which ways of being the Church, are good, and which are in some sense fractured or distorted. Often there's a complex mixture of these and other factors. Diversity has theological limits – and so we find Christians unable to recognise each other as faithful Christians, or we find different beliefs or practices leading to separation between churches.

- xiv. The LLF Course outlines ways in which Christians may differ: *“From looking at the example of other Churches, there are different ways of dealing with difference. One approach maintains the Church’s traditional teaching but stresses listening to and walking alongside individuals who live differently. The Church of England’s current official approach is similar to this. A second approach permits local churches to respond in different ways. For instance, some might bless or conduct same-sex marriages, while others might continue to view them as wrong. One question, however, is whether this is possible without changing church doctrine, liturgy or law. Can a church bless or marry a same-sex couple while teaching marriage is between one man and one woman? So a third approach is to change the church’s doctrine of marriage. Our task is to listen to the voice of God as we seek a way forward for our life together as the Church of England. We need to keep on reading the Bible, listening to teaching, hearing stories, learning and discussing together. We need to remember that the Church is the body of Christ, that we are bearers of the Spirit of God and that the ‘one who calls is faithful’ (1 Thessalonians 5.24).”*
- xv. The Diocese of Chichester is not called upon to decide which of the above three ways of handling difference it prefers. That is the task of General Synod. It might be that General Synod is unable to make a decision and consequently the Church remains in a place of uncertainty. It will be hard to sustain the current momentum for discussion generated by Living in Love and Faith indefinitely, but this need not preclude us from a commitment to continuing to explore scripture for greater insights into our identity and humanity, listening to teaching and to one another, particularly those with different views, and, in light of belonging to the Body of Christ, reflecting on the fact that as followers of Jesus Christ, our life is not our own. One thing is for certain, these issues are not going away.
- xvi. So, what might Chichester Diocesan Synod agree to say about matters of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage at this time and in light of the conversations that have been going on around the diocese? Some points of conclusion follow. These are not assertions that will universally be held by all but observations that we agree are consistently articulated in various quarters around the diocese.
 - a. That across the diocese there is commitment to continuing the process of learning from one another and from scripture about issues of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage beyond the life on the current General Synod.

- b. That nobody wants to see the Church fractured. A high view of scripture demands a high view of unity. However, because the household of faith has been placed under pressure by these issues, that there is a need to pray for grace and love as well as truth.
- c. That as individuals and churches we recognise that all our perspectives are partial and imperfect because we are all only partially healed and remain imperfect beings.
- d. That those responding to the survey believe these issues to be important but many, for various reason, are a little reticent to engage with others in conversation. Time will tell how representative this part of the survey is across the diocese, but that appropriate opportunities and encouragement for participation in the conversations are therefore needed for the time being.
- e. That the benefits of these conversations go beyond issues of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage and help us understand ourselves, the Body of Christ and the Kingdom of God better. And therefore that learning how to handle diversity in a constructive way has all sorts of benefits.
- f. That in this diocese a small majority of 38 responders would prefer to affirm the Church's historic position on identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage, namely 429 responders, compared to 391 who would prefer to see that position revised.
- g. That a significant number of Christians in the diocese have a sincerely held opinion that this current process was effectively all about ushering in a change in the doctrinal and liturgical position of the Church of England. It also needs to be recognised, in line with Pastoral Principle 1, that many of those who wish to adhere to the church's traditional teaching increasingly feel intimidated and fearful to speak out.
- h. That many LGBTQI+ Christians in this diocese continue to be badly hurt by discrimination in the life of the Church, and that to be regarded as an "issue" rather than as a person has contributed to dehumanisation.