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Dear brothers and sisters,

Following the latest announcement from the House of Bishops, I recently shared with Diocesan Synod my reflections on the Living in Loving and Faith (LLF) process.

In February 2023, I was one of the 40 bishops who voted in favour of the General Synod Motion that passed concerning Living in Love and Faith. The motion began by lamenting and repenting of the failure of the Church to be welcoming to LGBTQI+ people and for the harm, hurt and rejection they have experienced and continue to experience in the life of the Church. This is a lament and a repentance that our Church needs to keep on making. Recent developments have left many of our LGBTQI+ community feeling unwelcome, unwanted and unappreciated in our Church. At the same time, I also recognise that the LLF process has been bruising and painful for those who have not welcomed the changes it has proposed. This has been a difficult period for many.

As a result of LLF, some developments have occurred. The Resource section of the Prayers of Love and Faith has been commended by the House of Bishops. Synod was almost unanimous at its meeting in July in replacing the use of Issues in Human Sexuality. But it now seems likely that the introduction of the standalone services will not happen, nor will pastoral guidance be developed that will allow clergy in same sex relationships to enter into civil marriage.

At heart, I believe that the impasse that has been reached lies in Synod's decision that the final version of any prayers for use by same sex couples 'should not be contrary to, or indicative of a departure from, the doctrine of the Church of England'. (See the text of the February 2023 motion below). Such departure has not been the case for the developments introduced so far. The doctrinal and legal advice that the House of Bishops has received makes clear that neither the introduction of the Resource Section or the replacement of Issues in Human Sexuality imply any doctrinal change. However, the advice given has been that to introduce standalone services or to enable the civil marriage of same sex clergy to take place would imply a change in the Church's teaching and would therefore go against what Synod agreed in 2023.

So far the developments put in place have used a synodical process that requires a simple majority of only 50%. Where synod is minded to pass legislation that would imply a change in doctrine, this requires a two thirds majority. Given the current make up of General Synod, it is almost inconceivable that any proposals for standalone services or the civil marriage of same sex clergy,

both of which imply a change of doctrine, would pass. This is why the House of Bishops made its decision not to take these measures forward.

I want to apologise for the state we have got ourselves into and especially for the impact this has had on our LGBTQI+ brothers and sisters and many more besides. I'm also conscious that many who have opposed the direction proposed by LLF have also been deeply hurt. When I look back to the motion I voted for in February 2023, I believe that as bishops we massively overpromised and have since much underdelivered. I'm acutely conscious that this has left many feeling bruised, battered and wondering if they will ever have a future in our Church. I can only say how sorry I am that so many have been left in such a place. If we have learnt anything from LLF it is that our process needs to be much better designed and thought through. Had it been so, much heartache and hurt could have been avoided. I am sorry and take my responsibility for the damage and pain that has been caused.

A direct debate about whether our Church should change its doctrine of marriage has not yet happened. Given all the hurt that has been inflicted through the LLF process, I am not sure that anyone will want to open that discussion soon. Until then, I want to remind everyone that the use of the Resource Section of the Prayers of Love and Faith is something to which churches are free to 'opt in'. They are not something from which anyone should feel the need to 'opt out' – there is no expectation that they will, or should, be used. The decision to use or not use the prayers must be subject first and foremost to the consciences of individual ministers (be they clergy or Readers). I also suggest strongly that they should also only be used in any church with the agreement of the PCC.

The issues and disagreements that have surfaced through LLF are not going to go away. Our society and culture around us continue to change quickly and the questions about human identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage that LLF sought to address will continue to be part of our lives and those of our families, friends and communities. I hope and pray that as we think and explore these issues in the future we will be granted the grace to find better ways to discuss them next time.

This comes with all good wishes,

+ Michael Bar & Wells.

General Synod Motion as passed on 9 February 2023

The motion (as amended):

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.