



DIOCESE of
WINCHESTER



BISHOPS' STUDY DAY 2025

Hosted by Bishop Philip and Bishop Rhiannon, at this study day we explored theological reflections on responses to Prayers of Love and Faith (PLF).

Our guest speakers were Revd Canon Professor Liz Stuart MBE and Revd Dr Andrew Goddard.



**BISHOP PHILIP
MOUNSTEPHEN**

Welcome everyone. You're all very welcome here today and I'm very grateful to Duncan and the team here at St. Boniface for their hospitality. Thank you. And thank you for coming. I also want to thank in advance our two Doctors of the Church – Drs Liz Stuart and Andrew Goddard for repeating their double act at IME 2 which was so well received and which we felt deserved a wider audience. So thank you in advance to the two of you.

I want to say three things by way of introduction, and to set the scene for us.

The first is that I hope this day will do exactly what it says on the tin. It is a study day. It is, I suggest, therefore, not primarily a day for us to say what we think but to listen to what others think, which involves some self-discipline on our part – my own part not least.

It's not primarily a day to think about where the C of E currently is on LLF, and I don't want to say much about that – partly because, frankly, I don't really know where we are. But I will say this, to illustrate the point I want to make about listening.

There are currently two competing narratives in the C of E around LLF and the PLF in particular:

One narrative is that in approving PLF only the most minimal concession has been given to those who seek change, and that creates resentment amongst such people – no-one is being forced to do anything, so why make these prayers such an issue?

The other is that PLF are the first step on a very slippery slope to SSM being celebrated in Church and those who oppose it being marginalised within the church and possible even forced to take such services.

My point here is not that one view or the other is right, but that each is entirely understandable, depending on where you are coming from, and I believe that we owe one another the courtesy of listening to – and indeed respecting – that contrary perspective. And I hope that is just what we will do today.

My second point is maybe a bit nerdy, but I think is important, and it's a historic point.

I recently read Jeremy Morris book, 'A People's Church', a history of the C of E since the Reformation. (Actually it says it's a history of the C of E full stop, but I don't believe the C of E was founded under Henry VIII, rather it was reformed under Henry VIII, which is a different thing. However...)

Jeremy reminds us that the C of E since the Reformation has always tried to square two principles: conformity and comprehensiveness – being a church that both conforms to certain norms and is a Church for all England. You have to remember that pre-Reformation to be English was to be Anglican. The two were entirely coterminous – certainly since the shameful expulsion of the Jews in 1290. To be English was to be Anglican.

After the Reformation that contention because increasingly contentious, and the C of E increasingly and in many ever since has tried to square those two principles that have to be held in tension. conformity and comprehensiveness.

To what, post Reformation, was the C of E to conform, if it wasn't to Rome? The obvious answer was the royal supremacy – but how then was that to be expressed? Through having a common book of worship? Through having bishops? These things were not uncontentious: indeed we fought wars over them. The Reformation was fundamentally about where the Church derived its authority from – and, given that the C of E does not have a magisterium, that contested question of authority lies at the heart of our LLF debates today.

And the C of E has always tried to be comprehensive, to be a Church for all England, which is why historically the C of E has struggled, until the ecumenical movement of the last century, with the notion of dissent. In the 18th C many clergy would have seen it as their duty to stamp out dissent: people ought to be Anglicans. There were proposals in the 19th C to make the C of E intentionally very broad – a pale imitation of itself, some might say – so that it could once again become the Church for all England. Though that would, I think, have been to sacrifice any meaningful sense of conformity in the interests of being comprehensive.

But that issue of being comprehensive I think you see played out in LLF. How far distant from the country we are called to serve can the C of E afford to become?

So the C of E has always tried to be both centred and inclusive – and you can see that played out repeatedly historically: in the Reformation, the Elizabethan Settlement, the 1st Civil War, the Glorious Revolution; tensions between Whigs and Tories in 18th C and the constitutional crises which gave birth to the Oxford Movement in the early 19th C. So my point is that while this seems like new

territory for us, historically it's not. We're still trying to pay attention to conformity and comprehensiveness: how close to the centre (as I see it) do you need to be? How far from the centre (as I see it) does the boundary need to be? Are you in or out?

I'm not saying that the debates are only about those issues, but I do think it's helpful to see them in that broader context.

Finally let me say something about my own position because I think I owe you that – not of course that I expect you to share it – and I, not least, am here today to hear what others think. Indeed I can fairly say that in what I'm about to say there will be something to make everyone dissatisfied, but here goes.

Whenever I've been asked a question about this at interview this, roughly, is what I've said. I make five points:

1. We would do better if we all admitted we are conflicted on this. To my more conservative friends I want to say, are you really listening to the stories of exclusion and rejection LLGBTI+ people share. And to my more liberal friends I want to say, are you really paying attention to the Church's historic teaching and the witness of scripture. And I want to ask those questions of myself too, because I am conflicted. None of us, I think, should find this easy. If we do find it easy then I suggest there is something important to which we are not paying proper attention. None of us, I think, should find this easy which is why I think we really do need to listen to one another: this is work we need to do together.

2. I do believe in the C of E's doctrine of marriage as she has received it (and I believe that it's the nature of marriage that is the fundamental issue here rather than same sex relations per se). I don't believe we are at liberty to change it. Indeed I would say that it's not so much that the C of E has a doctrine of marriage but that we have our own expression of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church's doctrine of marriage.
3. We are no less accountable before God for the way we express ourselves in this debate than we are for the views we hold. If we cannot speak the truth – or what we hold to be the truth – in love, we would do far better not to speak at all.
4. My instinct is always to treat people as belonging rather than excluded. I don't want to de-church anyone, and I want to be chief pastor of everyone in this diocese, without exception. I have a strong personal inclination in that direction, but I also feel very strongly my own episcopal responsibility to attend to the unity of the Church of God. I refuse to treat anyone in this debate as anything other than a beloved brother or sister in Christ
5. And finally, none of us is in any position to throw any stones. And may this day be a day not of stone throwing, but of sharing the love. And with that I will pass over the Rhiannon, to lead us in worship, and draw us into the presence of the God who loves us.