



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.



**REVD CANON
PROFESSOR LIZ
STUART MBE**

PART ONE

I am Liz Stuart. I am associate priest at the Parish of St Matthew and St Paul, Winchester. I was a Professor of Theology and Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University of Winchester for a long time before my retirement. I am a long-time supporter and advocate for the blessing and marriage of same sex couples. I have written a few books on the subject. I was one of the founders of the academic journal Theology and Sexuality. In particular, I was involved in the development of something called Queer Theology which argues that sexuality and gender, though important things for navigating our contemporary life, and therefore rightly of concern to the Church, are not of ultimate concern, that is, they are not determinative of our relationship with God and therefore should not be determinative in the life of the Church. I am a rare thing in the Church of England, a vowed celibate in the Single Consecrated Life – there are about forty of us in the CofE who have taken these vows. We have a website and everything and are officially classed as afresh expression, which I find most amusing.

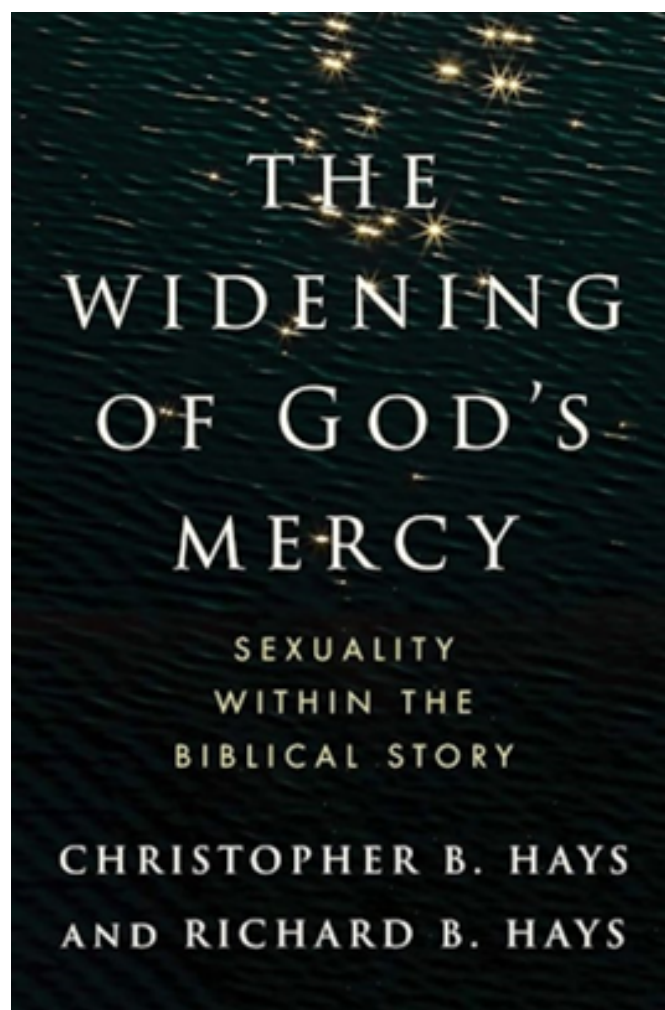
In my parish the PCC has passed resolutions to indicate that we will gladly offer prayers of love and faith and standalone services when we are able to offer them. I ‘did’ LLF four times, and I think that though the process was not sensitive to inequalities in power dynamics, overall, it was a very good process. I did it with four different groups, so I was exhausted in love and faith by the end of it, but I think that what came out it for those who engaged with it was the realisation that good, faithful, holy men and women who belong to Christ can hold very different views on these issues with integrity.

And so, I want to begin today by saying that even though I am passionately in favour of the Church solemnising and blessing same-sex relationships, I may be wrong. I do not believe that I am but my brothers in sisters in Christ who take a different view to me hold that possibility up before me and I must take that seriously. If I am wrong, I entrust myself to God's mercy and the fact he knows my heart. Indeed, I strongly suspect that when we all stand before the throne of grace, we will discover we were all wrong in some way on this issue.

And talking of grace. . . The overarching reason why I am in favour of the blessing of the relationships of same-sex couples, and indeed including them in holy matrimony is because I believe that when we read the scriptures through the Word of God, that is through Jesus Christ, we see that the arc of salvation bends towards wider and wider inclusion, often stretched by outsiders asking why they should not be included.

I love the story of the wedding of Cana. Jesus takes the water in the jars meant for washing, symbols of the purity system. Purity systems are all about hard boundaries, protecting identity, fear of the stranger and foreigner and are often particularly concerned about who marries who. He takes that water and all its symbolises and turns it into wine, a symbol of joy and sharing, and creates more wine than anyone at that wedding could possibly have drunk. God's grace is more abundant than any of us can imagine I love the story of the wedding of Cana. Jesus takes the water in the jars meant for washing, symbols of the purity system. Purity systems are all about hard boundaries, protecting identity, fear of the stranger and foreigner and are often particularly concerned about who marries who. He takes that water and all its symbolises and

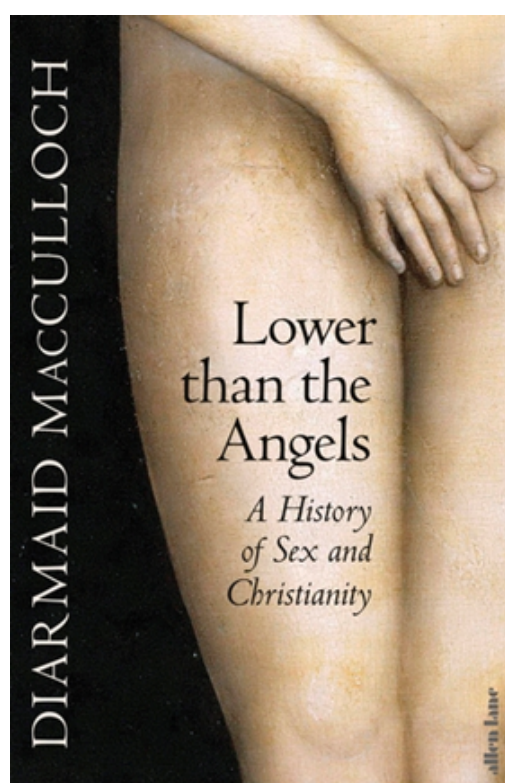
turns it into wine, a symbol of joy and sharing, and creates more wine that anyone at that wedding could possibly have drunk. God's grace is more abundant than any of us can imagine or manage. Indeed, we cannot manage it. And if we are not Jewish, all of us here are benefactors of that. I fear though that often we behave as if as followers of Christ we are called to manage a famine of grace (to use a phrase from Fr Jarel Robinson Brown) rather than be witnesses to a joyous abundance of grace. I think after over two thousand years we should have learned that the onus is on us to justify exclusion rather agonise over inclusion. There is a recent book which may be of interest by a father and son combo, the Hays, that examines this arc (I think some of what they say in the detail is well off beam, but the theme is, I think , spot on on).



It is in the context of this arc and abundance of grace that I think we must read the scriptural texts traditionally cited against homosexuality. In some cases, it is not clear exactly what the author is referring to and, in all cases, it is most certainly not loving, committed same-sex relationships.

It seems to me to be very significant that we become Christians by baptism and not biology and therefore I would argue sex and sexual orientation cannot be determinative of our relationship with God or our participation in Christian life, its sacraments, or estates.

If you have read Diarmaid McCulloch's magisterial study the history of sex in Christianity you will know that marriage is notable for being one of the things that the Church has been most easy about developing its teaching on, from St Paul in I Corinthians 7 'to the rest I say - I and not the Lord' to the Church of England's allowance of marriage after divorce (with the a former spouse still living) in the twentieth century.



When people do theology about marriage, they often root it in creation but in my view that is a partial perspective. As Christians we need to view primarily it in the context of the new creation wrought by God through Jesus where there is a theological shift so that the primordial marriage is no longer between Adam and Eve, man and woman, but between Christ and the Church and the Church, of course, is made of people of all genders. Also, I would venture to suggest that all of us who are involved in the blessing of marriages do so in hope rather than certainty. In blessing something there is an element of hopeful entrustment to God in the prayer that God will bring this imperfect thing to its telos, its end and fulfilment in him. We do not bless what is obviously sinful but everything we bless is imperfect and in need of redemption. When I preside at a heterosexual marriage I think I am conveying on behalf of the Church that we think your relationship has the potential to reflect and participate in the mystical union of Christ and his Church and I pray that it will, thank God for all it is and pray that God will bring it to this telos, but I cannot be certain or guarantee that is how it is going to pan out. I can see no reason same-sex relationships cannot symbolise for us the mystical union between Christ and the Church through manifesting self-sacrificial love which spills over into the world in fruitfulness.

And finally for the moment I would want to say that because we are acting in hope rather than certainty, I would argue that it is possible too to take the view that same-sex relationships may not be the ideal and still bless them as a good in a non-ideal context because God does not just make provision for the perfect or the ideal. Thank God.

PART TWO

A Part Report of the Episcopal Reference Group of the Faith and Order Commission has published nine theses on the doctrine of marriage, alongside another paper by the Faith and Order Commission which reviews the theology of marriage through the ages.

The authors claim that over the course of nearly five hundred years from the first Prayer Books to the current LFF process there is a stable core to the doctrine of marriage.

Marriage is the formation of a new unit, the 'one flesh' union of a woman and a man.

Marriage is God's gift in creation.

Marriage is 'an honourable estate.'

Marriage is a sign of the relationship between Christ and the Church.

Marriage is for bearing and raising children.

Marriage is the proper context for sexual intimacy.

Marriage is founded on friendship.

Marriage is permanent and lifelong.

Marriage is made (a) by the couple's free consent, (b) by contracting words of promise.

1. Marriage is the formation of a new unit, the 'one flesh' union of a woman and a man.

According to this document it is the one flesh union that happens in marriage that provides the theological content to marriage. And it is this union

that images the relationship of Christ and his Church. Some people believe that it is sexual union that creates this one flesh union.

2. Marriage is God's gift in creation.

Marriage is not just a social or cultural institution but is the initiative of God as his gift in creation and is the basis of society. This is why the Church has traditionally recognised civil marriage and the marriages of other faiths.

3. Marriage is 'an honourable estate.'

This is the language the Prayer Book uses and replaces the language of sacrament that was and still is used in the Roman Catholic Church. It means a way of life, not the only way of life, but a way of life made holy by God, albeit a temporary one because it does not survive death.

4. Marriage is a sign of the relationship between Christ and the Church.

Here the authors note that marriage may not be a sacrament, but it is sacramental, it is a sign of the relationship between Christ and his Church. The authors note that there has been a shift in understanding what that means away from male headship towards the quality of Christ's relationship to the Church.

5. Marriage is for bearing and raising children.

Here the authors note a shift from defining procreation purely in terms of generating children towards fruitfulness more widely understood.

6. Marriage is the proper context for sexual intimacy.

By God's design and command, sex belongs with an exclusive, loving, faithful, permanent, covenanted union. The authors recognise that there has been a movement away from regarding marriage as a 'remedy for sin' towards a more positive approach to sex in marriage.

7. Marriage is founded on friendship.

8. Marriage is permanent and lifelong.

Here, of course, there has been some nuancing of the Church of England's position to allow remarriage after divorce while a former spouse is still living which the authors argue is a pastoral accommodation rather than a shift in theology.

9. Marriage is made (a) by the couple's free consent, (b) by contracting words of promise.

While wanting to claim a high degree of consistency and stability over the last five hundred years, the authors acknowledge significant theological developments in the theology of marriage including the introduction of the theory of complementarity into Issues of Human Sexuality which they recognise is a weak theory to justify confining marriage to heterosexual people. The question is whether the doctrinal envelope of the Church's teaching on marriage is large enough to accommodate same-sex marriage or indeed PLF (even if the authors make the point that PLF and stand-alone services will most definitely not be marriage).

I wonder if it accurate and helpful to speak of the doctrine of marriage. It is not a language that I recall hearing in earlier debates on marriage and sexuality and implies a status and permanence to the teaching on marriage that it does not have. When people are baptised, they are asked to affirm the creed in which marriage and relationships do not feature. The fact that the Church of England has always regarded marriage as an estate rather than a dominical sacrament should I think caution us against regarding it as a doctrine and certainly not a first order doctrine such as are contained in the creeds.

The Faith and Order Commission has produced a paper which looks at several types of disagreement in the Church and proposes a way forward.

<i>If it is a...</i>	<i>then it affects...</i>	<i>which may mean...</i>
1st order disagreement	Apostolic communion: <i>ability to recognise the other as in Christ (1a) or to recognise the other's teaching as being within the bounds of apostolic faith and life (1b)</i>	Schism, leaving, expulsion/withdrawing of licenses
2nd order disagreement	Ecclesial communion: <i>ability to live together in one church</i>	Separate structures (separate doctrine, discipline, ministry, sacramental life); relating to one another on an 'ecumenical' plane
2.5 order disagreement	Intra-ecclesial communion: <i>degrees of communion within one church</i>	A degree of impaired communion within episcopate and priesthood. Separate sacramental and pastoral space within the church.
3rd order disagreement	<i>Ability to cooperate fully in some aspects of mission and ministry</i>	Pastoral guidance, conscience clauses, and code of practice sufficient to manage ongoing disagreement.
to which we might add,		
1st/2nd/3rd order disagreement treated as 2.5 order disagreement for the time being	Apostolic communion or ecclesial communion or quality of intra-church relationships	Provisional, reversible arrangements that refuse to give up on key elements of ecclesial unity but which give sufficient space and time for discernment about what is necessary/possible

A Level 1 disagreement means that sometimes the parties cannot recognise the other as being in Christ at all, usually because their teaching or behaviour is not regarded as part of authentic Christianity. Some distinguish between the perceived error in teaching and the people who hold it.

Level 2 disagreement means that disagreement is serious enough that some sort of ecclesial separation is considered necessary but not so serious as the parties are regarded as outside the bounds of orthodoxy. This sort of disagreement can be between or within churches. Historically Level 2 disagreements have clustered around sacraments and ministry, but it could be argued that where people disagree as to how to live out a life of holiness this level could apply.

A Level 3 disagreement is a disagreement that is important but which we can all live with and minimally impacts our ability to co-operate in ministry and mission. It involves respecting and making accommodation for different views.

The problem we have is that we cannot agree on what sort of disagreement we are having over LLF/PLF. For some people it is most certainly a first or second order disagreement, for others it is a third order disagreement.

In seeking to avoid the implications of a first or second order disagreement, the Faith and Order Commission offers a fourth model – provisionality.

They say:

Provisionality in this context means acknowledging that what we propose to do may be mistaken, may be insufficient, may be unnecessary, may be unstable, may be temporary. It is not 'The Answer,' but a mode of testing and discerning that neither stands still nor claims to have finally arrived. Provisionality may be appropriate language for the ongoing process concerning the PLF, proposed changes in clergy discipline, or the wider exploration of teaching around marriage and relationships. In the area of what has been called 'pastoral reassurance,' provisionality means putting arrangements in place that are modest, scale-up-able, and reversible (though also sufficiently secure for confidence).

It is a means of creating a time of testing when certainty is elusive and there is no widespread agreement. There are precedents within the concepts of reception and discernment used over the ordination of women.

Provisionality could also justify some sort of ecclesiastical accommodation for those who think this is a first or second level disagreement.

I like this idea a lot. It would allow us to move forward toward greater inclusivity, subjecting ourselves to an authentic, humble testing probably by future generations. The Church of England is used to settlements – holding together different theological views. Every time I preside at BCP Communion I am struck by the ability of that liturgy to hold together different theological views on the Eucharist and to do so with grace and beauty. Surely it is not beyond the wit of the contemporary Church to do something similar over the theology of marriage.