

Andrew Attwood
April 2023

Dear Members of St. John the Evangelist,
I hope you are well at this Easter-time.

This long letter is an important one - as it defines my position in the current C of E climate, along with support from our PCC. It includes a letter to and from our Bishop.

In the last two months the CEEC (The Church of England Evangelical Council) have advised evangelical churches and leaders to consider taking action over the recent proposed (but not yet commended) blessing prayers for same-sex couples. This letter is intended to paint a picture of how we got to this point, and why I as vicar will be holding to a specific position, and with the PCC's formal support, why we as a church will be taking various actions.

As I have said throughout our exploration of this matter, I am always very keen to talk things through with anyone in our church who may carry questions or need pastoral support. Transparent and open conversation is always available to anyone who needs it. Everyone is welcome.

Background

The subject of marriage and homosexuality has been debated in the C of E for decades. Here is a link for a summary of the story dating back to the 1960's. (<https://religionmediacentre.org.uk/factsheets/factsheet-sexuality-timeline-in-the-church-of-england/>) The church has been clear for most of this time that marriage is a divine ordinance from God, between one man and one woman. What has been a welcome development is the increased intent to show support, care and inclusion of same-sex attracted Christians, while encouraging them to remain celibate in line with God's teaching.

In 2003 a US bishop was appointed, Gene Robinson, who was a gay man living with his partner. This created significant divisions across the worldwide Anglican Communion. This division has continued to be a problem for years.

You will remember that same-sex marriage was legalised in the UK in 2014. At that time, the law affirmed that the C of E should not marry gay couples and clergy were protected from being sued for discrimination if they refused to marry gay couples.

My own involvement in the debate and recent developments

Not long after, the C of E engaged in what was called 'Shared Conversations' - where clergy and lay people met to explore the subject. This was my own introduction to the matter, overlapping with my election to General Synod (where I served for 6 years) - so I've been personally in discussions for about 10 years now, exploring the matter from every conceivable angle with people whom I have both agreed and disagreed.

In 2017 a proposal from the House of Bishops, holding to the doctrine of marriage, but providing good pastoral support for same-sex attracted Christians, was presented to General Synod, but was marginally rejected by Synod when it came to the vote. In response, the 'Living in Love and Faith' document began to be researched and written, with our own Bishop Christopher overseeing the process.

In 2021 (after two years of considered discussion) our PCC affirmed the following position as a local church: "In the light of our belief in scripture as God's Word, we acknowledge God's creation of humankind as male and female and the unchangeable standard of Christian marriage between one man and one woman as the proper place for sexual intimacy. We warmly welcome all who connect with our church community, and for any who may struggle with God's word regarding identity, sex and sexuality, we are committed to listen, support and help, as we all strive to faithfully follow God together as a family."

(For anyone new to church, the original document I wrote on this doctrinal and pastoral matter can be found here on our website: <https://www.stjohn316.co.uk/files/ugd/d3711f575f49fd914a4aaba36dcd67c5943a64.pdf>)

After 5 years of work given to LLF, the House of Bishops met several times to review the material and responses from the church to it. In January, 2023, the House of Bishops produced another proposal for Synod, still affirming the doctrine of marriage being between one man and one woman, but they also included draft prayers which allowed blessing prayers (in some presently drafted un-clear way) for same sex couples. This draft proposal has pleased no-one. Neither the liberal/progressives who want gay marriage, nor the evangelicals who hold to scripture were at all content. Yet in February 2023 General Synod still affirmed this preliminary proposal by a slim margin of votes. The House of Bishops are clearly divided, as is General Synod as a whole.

Insights from our Bishop

In February 2023, soon after GS, Bishop Christopher spoke to the local Diocesan Evangelical Fellowship, expressing his perspective on how we got to where we are. He said that after five years of intense study, he is even more persuaded that marriage is between one man and one woman. He told us that he had been encouraged (last November/December) when the House of Bishops were becoming clear on holding to the doctrine of marriage, but around that time some individual bishops broke rank and started publishing articles in favour of same sex marriage. Additionally, even centrally, videos were circulated which seemed to infer a plan for more inclusion. According to the bishop Christopher, this was out of step with where the House of Bishops had got to. To make matters worse, the plan for draft prayers (which shouldn't contradict biblical marriage) were rushed through, without the bishops having time to properly review them. He acknowledged that the bishops had made some mistakes, leading to strong reactions around the Anglican Communion (his article here explains more: <https://covenant.livingchurch.org/2023/02/21/living-in-love-and-faith-where-do-things-stand-where-do-we-go-from-here/>).

Consequently, we now have a lot of very concerned evangelical churches, who sense that the direction of travel is being driven towards an unbiblical conclusion, despite many bishops wishing to hold to marriage as the scriptures teach it. Some churches have already spoken out.

Taking action

We evangelicals have now been encouraged by the CEEC to take action, as a means of showing the bishops and archbishops that we cannot continue like this. After almost a decade of listening and talking, the time to act is upon us. Listening and talking has not produced any change of mind. **On March 30th 2023, our PCC formally supported my position as vicar in the decision I am making; regarding proposed prayers of blessing. They also supported the following actions listed below.**

For your information, here is the slightly abbreviated letter sent to Bishop Christopher, Archdeacon Barry and David Hammond (our Area Dean).

The Letter:

Dear Bishop Christopher, Archdeacon Barry, David (Area Dean),
I hope you are well.

I'm writing to pass on news of a set of decisions made recently at PCC (March 30th). These decisions have a two-fold purpose: 1. As church leadership to straightforwardly affirm our allegiance to Christ and his Word, and 2. To hopefully strengthen your resolve as leaders to do the same at this challenging time.

1. My Position on Same-Sex Blessings

I have asked the PCC to formally support me in my choice not to offer or allow any same-sex blessings in this local church context, regardless of any future decisions made by the House of Bishops and General Synod.

I have arrived at this position in keeping with the following factors -

- The clear teaching of Holy Scripture,
- Canon Law of the Church of England (B30)
- The long tradition and evangelical history of the church of St John the Evangelist, Kenilworth
- The Declaration of Assent I made at my Ordination (*committing to scripture and creeds*)
- My conscience, based on the authority of Holy Scripture

Number 20 of the 39 Articles of faith of the Church of England says, "*Of the Authority of the Church: The Church hath power to decree Rites or Ceremonies, and authority in Controversies of Faith: and yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God's Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another.*"

This historic position asserts that we do not have the right to depart from the inherited teaching of God's Holy Word. Therefore to even propose prayers of blessing of same-sex couples, whilst supposedly holding to the existing doctrine of marriage is both a blatant contradiction and a clear rejection of our historic faith. Such prayers would be theologically incoherent and against Canon Law. In this matter (so far), the House of Bishops have walked away from our faith, and in this matter I will not follow them.

Whilst holding to the clear teachings of scripture on marriage, I remain fully committed to reaching out to, protecting and supporting same-sex attracted people, welcoming them and discipling them as all are welcomed and discipled in the church.

The PCC have voted to formally support me as I take this position.

All the retired and active clergy who serve this church, and the seven Co-Leaders have also signalled their support.

2. PCC support for other immediate actions

The PCC also voted to affirm a set of proposals, which I can now communicate to all three of you (as our local C of E representatives).

- a. PCC agree with the CEEC's proposal (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JO3nsDInDiQ>) ; that the C of E now needs a negotiated settlement where we establish permanent evangelical oversight for evangelical churches. This will be hard to achieve, but much less costly and damaging than the acrimonious and tragic conflict that happened in recent years to the North American Episcopal church.
- b. PCC have encouraged me to seek reassurance and protection from you, our Bishop, given my stance on the proposed prayers. I hope you can straightforwardly assure me of my safety and freedom in making this position clear.
- c. We would also seek further clarity from all three of you regarding your own position on the matter of same-sex blessings - so to aid our present relationship with the Diocese going forward. At this time, ambiguity is unhelpful. Good relationships would be helped by you stating where you are on this matter. Thank you Bishop Christopher for beginning to say more already. We would love to hear from Barry and David too.
- d. I will share my statement and proposals with the local DEF; for consultation, support and to aid united action. In other words, our intent is to encourage others to speak up too.
- e. Additionally, I want to ask David to help facilitate a conversation in Kenilworth Chapter regarding this matter.
- f. I will of course let our church know that our view is still clear on marriage, and we are taking further steps to show this to the Deanery and Diocese. I will provide informal additional teaching and conversation for any church members who are new, or still unclear on the matter in hand. Additionally, we would encourage members to use and promote the excellent resources at livingout.org, as a guide to theology and pastoral care of those who are same-sex attracted. We will tell church that we wish to stress love and welcome to all and any same-sex attracted people in our church or connecting to our community.

3. PCC support for timed actions

- a. We are now informing you of our planned actions for July 2023 (when General Synod next meets). This would give you our Bishop several months' notice during which you can respond or act without immediate pressure:
- b. If prayers of blessing for same-sex unions (sexual) receive the go ahead at General Synod (in the absence of a negotiated settlement), we would need to formally break relationship with the institution as a whole. In practice this would involve a withdrawal of communication with Deanery and Diocese. Even if you our local representatives are evangelical, you still represent the institution.
- c. If prayers of blessing for same-sex unions (sexual) receive the go ahead at the next Synod, we would need to immediately pause our Parish Share and begin to re-allocate funds - obviously covering our own costs, and to fund only orthodox ministry. There are different ways this could possibly be arranged via the DEF.

We are acting in this measured way to show unity with our acting evangelical brothers and sisters across the nation and world, but also giving time for the House of Bishops to reconsider the direction of the C of E, without fearing an immediate financial problem.

In the meantime,

We would ask you, our Bishop to signal your support for the idea of a negotiated settlement. We wish to see dialogue with key bodies beginning and plans emerging, that take seriously the need for a new structural arrangement. This should involve the orthodox churches 'remaining at the centre' of the C of E, and that any provision for revisionist/liberal churches with supporting clergy, bishops and structures designated as a 'new and separate' province. If you could do this, we will do whatever we can to support you.

If you wish to have a conversation with me and/or our core leaders do feel free to contact me. We value your obvious commitment to Christ and his Word. We want to have good relationship through this challenging time. Our ultimate desire is to have this distraction fully resolved, so we can get on with the mission of Jesus Christ and see many disciples made. We continue to pray for you as our Bishop and the C of E as a whole.

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End of letter

The Bishop has kindly replied:

"Dear Andrew,
Many thanks for your email and for your attached document.

It's helpful to have your position set out clearly should the prayers in their present form 'go ahead at [July 2023] General Synod'.

You'll know my views on the work, including the questions that need to be faced, that is needed following the February Synod and my indication of the scale of the work ahead, and its implications for timings ([my blog](#)). So my view at the moment is that there is a great deal unknown, and the test the provision has set itself of neither a departure nor indicative of a departure from the doctrine of the Church of England, is a high one. As you may well know, three groups of Bishops, supported by advisers, have been set up to address these questions (Prayers of Love and Faith, Pastoral Guidance; Pastoral Reassurance). I am clear that the liturgical provision itself needs to be revisited in a serious way, and I hope to be able to contribute to that through the Prayers group. The Pastoral Reassurance Group will be dealing with the sort of important matters you describe in terms of 'safety and freedom'. There is a strong will on all sides that the 'reassurance and

protection' for which you ask will be provided. I regard it as essential. Personally, I cannot see how all this work can be completed in time for the July Synod.

Given that there is still so much to decide, I think that it is too early to insist on 'a negotiated settlement' of the sort you describe. There is still much to be settled through proper Christian negotiation in the work of the Groups and much for both the College and – in my view – for the House of Bishops to discern and decide when the outcome of the group work is presented to them.

I hope this is of some help in what are, admittedly, uncertain times.

With my prayers

Yours
+ Christopher “

I have thanked the Bishop for his reassuring and helpful reply, and will continue to pray for him.

Other action emerging

In the meantime, other evangelical vicars and churches in the diocese will meet in May 2023 (thanks to the organisation of the DEF) and we can review, discuss and possibly coordinate these kinds of positions and actions across the diocese. St. John the Evangelist's early action has already been appreciated as a help to encourage other churches to act.

It may well be, as the Bishop suggests, that the House of Bishops and General Synod take much longer than originally planned to decide on anything. Nevertheless, I want to strengthen the Bishop's resolve early on, so that he and others know that these kinds of proposed prayers will cause significant change in dioceses across the country.

Final words and prayer request

As I said in my letter, whilst holding to the clear teachings of scripture on marriage, I remain fully committed to reaching out to, protecting and supporting same-sex attracted people, warmly welcoming them and discipling them as all are welcomed and discipled in the church.

I personally hope that this letter is an encouragement to you as members. I want to take seriously my responsibility to lead and teach in line with scripture. I want you to feel completely secure in your place here at St. John the Evangelist. I want us to help (if possible) turn things around.

Do please pray for me, the PCC (who have boldly supported me), the other clergy (who also wholeheartedly agree) and the Co Leaders (who are also of one mind with me on this matter). You have good people leading here, and I am very grateful to all of them.

Please do pray for Bishop Christopher and the House of Bishops, as they carry responsibility for the direction of the C of E.

God bless you

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