

Seeking a way forward on sexuality: A new proposal

At the close of the last General Synod in July, after the bishops and Synod had in February agreed to bring the Living in Love and Faith/Prayers of Love and Faith (LLF/PLF) process to a close, a Private Members Motion (PMM) was debated which sought, [as amended during the debate](#), to

recognise a legitimate range of theological perspectives, held in good conscience, across the Church of England, on the right ordering of committed, faithful, intimate same-sex relationships and recognise that this includes views that affirm and views that reject the position that there are no fundamental objections to being in such a relationship and that such a relationship can be entirely compatible with Christian discipleship and ministry.

Although passed in the Houses of Clergy and Laity it was defeated due to a close vote in the House of Bishops with a majority opposing the motion (11-14, 93-79, 101-83). This was met with relief by almost all of those supporting the church's current teaching and a mix of anger, bewilderment and frustration by those seeking change and wishing their views to be formally recognised as "legitimate...theological perspectives" to which there were "no fundamental objections".

It seems clear that those wishing to see change in the church's teaching and practice will continue to press for further development in the new General Synod. However, unless there is a massive swing in their favour in the current elections, they face significant problems in gaining the necessary support. It is now accepted that the bishops will not seek to commend any new liturgy. Instead liturgical change will require authorisation by General Synod (under canon B2) and this needs a 2/3 majority in all three Houses. This seems highly unlikely. Other changes, notably in relation to permitting clergy to enter civil same-sex marriage, may only require a simple majority in all three Houses. There is the possibility that such a majority may be lacking among the laity (and, possible but less likely, even the clergy) after the elections. Even if there is such a majority the likelihood is that it will be small (still stuck at Brexit 52:48 or closer). The bishops, many of them believing such a development to be wrong (including the senior bishops in Winchester, Durham, and likely by then also in London) and/or concerned to maintain the unity of the church, may well—as with the PMM vote in July—defeat proposals in a vote by Houses.

Charlie Bączyk-Bell's motion appealing to "reception"

And yet it seems clear that there remains a "range of theological perspectives, held in good conscience, across the Church of England" and so the question arises as to how to respond to this reality. This week, in his Deanery Synod in Southwark Diocese, The Revd Dr Charlie Bączyk-Bell is proposing a motion which is seeking to chart a new way

forward similar to that found in the PMM and hoping ultimately to bring the motion via Southwark Diocesan Synod to General Synod. It does this with additional material appealing to the concept of “open reception” as the theological and ecclesiological rationale for following this path. The motion reads

This Synod, committed to maintaining the overall unity of the Church of England, including the unity of each diocese under the jurisdiction of the diocesan bishop,

a. believes such unity, as an expression of koinonia that ‘comes to us as a gift we can only accept in gratitude’ (Hiroshima Report), is an ever-unveiling gift to the church from the Lord Jesus, to be received and celebrated in faith rather than created in fear;

b. for the purpose of maintaining this unity, calls upon this deanery, the Diocese of Southwark and the wider Church of England to uphold the principle of ‘Open Reception’ (as a period of active discernment) as it relates to the inclusion of LGBTQIA people in the church, in a similar way to that indicated by the Eames Commission on women’s ministry; noting that “reception is a long and spiritual process” (Grindrod Report);

c. in particular calls upon this deanery, diocese, and the Church of England, to affirm that those who dissent from, as well as those who assent to, various practical measures of LGBTQIA inclusion — such as the blessing of same-sex couples, civil marriage, and marriage in church of same-sex couples, and their being admitted to the priesthood and episcopate as full and equal members — are both loyal Anglicans and followers of the Lord Jesus Christ in this shared tradition;

e. [sic] also affirms that “although some of the means by which communion is expressed may be strained...there is a need for courtesy, tolerance, mutual respect, and prayer for one another, and we confirm that our desire to know or be with one another, remains binding on us as Christians” (Eames, p.119).

In order to help Deanery Synod members, the overwhelming majority of whom will come to the vote knowing little or nothing about what is meant by “reception” or “open reception”, Charlie has produced an explanatory note. There is a lot packed into the motion and the note which will need more sustained analysis and reflection than can be offered here. What follows seeks to offer an initial cautionary critique. It highlights two central reasons why I think that the appeal to “open reception” (which builds on the appeal to this concept by the now-retired Bishop of Southwark in his [March 2023 Presidential Address to Southwark Diocesan Synod](#)) is not as simple as is made out and indeed seriously flawed. It also draws attention to the motion’s failure to address what has been clearly identified as a, perhaps the, crucial question we now face: how we determine the theological significance of our differences. These three weaknesses

mean that this proposed way forward is sadly not one able to gain the support of those who are committed to the church's current teaching and practice such as the many people who, like me, are supporters of [The Alliance](#).

The motion's stated aim: Maintaining Church of England unity

The motion presents itself as seeking to maintain “the overall unity of the Church of England, including the unity of each diocese under the jurisdiction of the diocesan bishop”. For those aware of the details of recent debates about what “pastoral provision” would be needed were there be further developments in the church's teaching and practice in relation to marriage, this motion from the start signals that there is no willingness to engage with what The Alliance has said they would require in such circumstances. They are seeking a guarantee, if further changes are introduced, of being able to continue to have what they can recognise as “orthodox ordinary oversight”. In other words, should a diocesan bishop depart from the received teaching of the Church of England on marriage that they promised to uphold, then those unable to accept this development should be able to come instead under the jurisdiction of a bishop other than their current diocesan bishop, a bishop who does continue to uphold current teaching and discipline.

Clearly “the unity of each diocese under the jurisdiction of the diocesan bishop” is indeed, as the motion notes, something to be sought. Relinquishing the present structural form of this would signify there has regrettably been a diminution in “the overall unity of the Church of England”. However, a change which involved reconfiguring the boundaries of a diocese (not something set in stone and historically dioceses included parishes some distance away) in order to secure the highest degree of communion possible could still maintain the unity of each diocese under the jurisdiction of its diocesan.

The difficulty is that questions of unity and order cannot be considered simply on the basis of this principle detached from questions of faith and morals. The unity to be sought also depends on bishops upholding their consecration vows. These include being “ready, with all faithful diligence, to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange doctrine contrary to God's Word; and both privately and openly to call upon and encourage others to the same” ([BCP Ordinal](#)) and affirming they “believe the doctrine of the Christian faith as the Church of England has received it” and that in their ministry they will “expound and teach it” ([Common Worship](#)).

Alongside unity coming to us as “a gift...to be received and celebrated in faith” it also comes to us a calling and a challenge (the 2022 Primates' Task Group was entitled, “[The Gift, Call and Challenge of Communion](#)”). Indeed, the full title of [The Hiroshima Report](#) quoted in the motion is *Koinonia: God's Gift and Calling*. The “calling” aspect is largely downplayed here. The claim that *koinonia* is “something the Church receives as a gift

rather than something it constructs” (italics added) while clearly true at a fundamental level could be construed as weakening or denying the “call” aspect and the effect of our own actions on our *koinonia*. The words of the recent Anglican [Nairobi-Cairo proposals](#) (para 27) capture this need to hold together what the motion does not - faith and order, gift and calling:

As the ecumenical movement has long professed, the unity of the Church is both gift and call. As gift, the communion of the Church — her agreement in faith, her visible ordering, and her mission — is not ours to achieve; it is God’s own accomplishment in Christ who “reconciles all things to himself, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:19-20; cf. Eph. 4:3). As call, the communion of the Church — her faith, order, and mission — remains something towards which we strive, as the Lord commissioned his disciples on the night he was betrayed, that they and we all may, through obedience, mutual service, and love, be one (see John 17; cf. Phil. 4:2).

Ephesians 4:3 quoted there captures the challenge: we are “to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace”. The reality is that it is currently proving difficult to “keep the unity of the Spirit” because of innovative proposals seeking to develop “the doctrine of the Christian faith as the Church of England has received it” in ways that many see as a departure from that faith. This is what is unsettling and threatening “the overall unity of the Church of England, including the unity of each diocese under the jurisdiction of the diocesan bishop”.

A major difficulty with the motion is that it seems to be saying that in relation to church teaching on marriage and sexual ethics those who continue to believe this must now accept within the life of the church developments which reject what we have until now received. However, alongside this, there can never be anything which adapts in any way “the unity of each diocese under the jurisdiction of the diocesan bishop”. On that matter, in contrast to questions of doctrine and ethics, we apparently need to be ecclesial fundamentalists who view this feature of church governance as an absolute non-negotiable.

The motion’s key concept: Reception

But of course the reality is that the Church of England has, in other areas, introduced developments in teaching and practice. Although in doing this it has had to significantly adapt its understanding of how *koinonia*, unity and episcopacy are related to each other, it has not as yet developed patterns of episcopal ministry which challenge “the unity of each diocese under the jurisdiction of the diocesan bishop” or reconfigure diocesan boundaries.

As the motion notes the most obvious recent example of this relates to “women’s ministry” where Charlie notes that appeal was made to “the principle of ‘Open

Reception’ (as a period of active discernment)”. The motion therefore calls for the deanery, diocese and wider Church of England to also uphold this principle now “as it relates to the inclusion of LGBTQIA people in the church”. It appeals to “the Eames Commission on women’s ministry” (the 1997 Report from the Commission is [here](#)) and [the 1988 Grindrod Report](#) which spoke of reception as “a long and spiritual process”.

So, do these documents, and does this principle, justify the statement that “those who assent to, various practical measures of LGBTQIA inclusion — such as the blessing of same-sex couples, civil marriage, and marriage in church of same-sex couples, and their being admitted to the priesthood and episcopate as full and equal members — are both loyal Anglicans and followers of the Lord Jesus Christ in this shared tradition”? Is there sufficient warrant for the extension of reception to “the inclusion of LGBTQIA people in the church”?

This raises the whole question of *when*, and *on what basis*, and *with what practical consequences*, any part of the church may justifiably claim that some proposed innovation is now to be judged as acceptable, thus requiring the church to see and define itself as in a period of “Open Reception” as regards that development. Here the motion and explanatory note are silent simply noting that

‘Open Reception’ is not a new invention for this debate. It is the principle the Church of England and the wider Anglican Communion already used to hold together through an earlier, comparably difficult period of change: the ordination of women. Following the 1988 Lambeth Conference, the Eames Commission — chaired by Archbishop Robin Eames — was asked how the Communion could remain in the fullest possible communion (koinonia: the shared life and fellowship that binds the Church together, even amid disagreement) while some provinces ordained women and others did not, before the matter was settled either way. Its answer was that the development could proceed and be tested — received or not received — across the whole Church over time, on the understanding that both those who accepted it and those who could not in conscience do so remained loyal members of one Church, owed one another courtesy, tolerance and continued fellowship while discernment continued. The Grindrod Report, presented to that same Lambeth Conference, made the same point in different words: that “reception is a long and spiritual process”, not a single vote that settles a question overnight....This motion asks the deanery to apply that same, tested principle to the question of LGBTQIA inclusion: to treat the current diversity of practice and conviction as a period of active, ongoing discernment held in common, rather than as a fracture to be resolved by one side simply prevailing over the other.

This is, however, a much more complex question than is suggested here. In particular, two important aspects are simply ignored, perhaps because they seriously undermine

the attempt to extend at this time the language of “open reception” to the areas we are now wrestling with in the Church of England. These two aspects are

- how the Communion has spoken about applying reception to these questions and
- how the Communion and the Church of England applied reception in relation to opening the orders of priest and bishop to women.

First Problem: Sexuality and Reception in The Anglican Communion and The Church of England

The Windsor Report

Firstly, it is noteworthy that the documents being appealed to are ecumenical and Anglican Communion documents but there is no reference at all to the wider ecumenical and Anglican Communion context in calling on a deanery, diocese and the Church of England to apply “Open Reception” to such matters as “the blessing of same-sex couples, civil marriage, and marriage in church of same-sex couples, and their being admitted to the priesthood and episcopate as full and equal members”.

In fact, the Anglican Communion did consider these matters when The Episcopal Church sought to argue along similar lines (most fully in [To Set Our Hope on Christ](#)) in relation to its introduction of such innovations over two decades ago. It did so in [The Windsor Report](#) of 2004, which Charlie fails to mention. This report of the Lambeth Commission, also under the chairmanship of Archbishop Robin Eames whose earlier report in relation to reception and women’s ordination Charlie does cite, explicitly considered whether such an extension of the principle of reception applied in relation to women priests and bishops, was legitimate within Anglican ecclesiology. [Paras 67 to 70](#) explore “Discernment in communion and reception”. The report explains (in [para 68](#)) the concept and process of reception in these terms:

Within our common life, one way in which unity has been maintained is by subjecting fresh developments within the Anglican Communion to a test of reception. In classical theological terms, ‘reception’ was the process by which the pronouncements of a Council of the Church were tested by how the faithful ‘received’ it. The *consensus fidelium* (‘common mind of the believers’) constituted the ultimate check that a new declaration was in harmony with the faith as it had been received. More recently, the doctrine has been used in Anglicanism as a way of testing whether a controversial development, not yet approved by a universal Council of the Church but nevertheless arising within a province by legitimate processes, might gradually, over time, come to be accepted as an authentic development of the faith. This offers a clear threefold sequence:

- (i) theological debate and discussion
- (ii) formal action, and
- (iii) increased consultation to see whether the formal action settles down and makes itself at home.

This process of consultation, designed to strengthen Communion, is the very opposite of confrontation, and leads to a shared discernment of God's truth. It is a key way of maintaining the unity of the Church through a time of experiment and uncertainty.

It then makes this crucial statement in [para 69](#):

We should note, however, that the doctrine of reception only makes sense if the proposals concern matters on which the Church has not so far made up its mind. It cannot be applied in the case of actions which are explicitly against the current teaching of the Anglican Communion as a whole, and/or of individual provinces. No province, diocese or parish has the right to introduce a novelty which goes against such teaching and excuse it on the grounds that it has simply been put forward for reception. In such a case, if change is desired, it must be sought through the appropriate channels, which we describe elsewhere.

This judgment is one which undermines the whole approach being taken by the motion and raises serious questions about its appeal to "open reception" from Communion documents.

Lambeth 2022

One response to this may be that this was the position back in 2004 but that all this changed at the last Lambeth Conference due to statements by Archbishop Justin Welby. Those statements did indeed seek to reframe the Communion's approach into something more akin to it now being in a period of "open reception" within the Communion. [I offered a critique of the illegitimacy of this, and the dubious manner in which it was introduced at the time](#). The then Archbishop was not only discarding the unanimous Windsor Report but overturning the clear statement of the primates when he first gathered them in 2016. In relation to developments in some provinces on matters of marriage and sexuality they stated not that these showed we were in a time of reception but rather:

In keeping with the consistent position of previous Primates' meetings such unilateral actions on a matter of doctrine without Catholic unity is considered by many of us as a departure from the mutual accountability and interdependence implied through being in relationship with each other in the Anglican Communion.

The question is why Charlie, though quoting Communion documents, is so selective. Why does he not even acknowledge, let alone engage with, the Windsor Report's assessment? Does he think it can simply be ignored by relying on a quasi-papal declaration by Justin Welby?

The mind of the Church of England

More seriously his argument appealing to reception does not really work *even if* one were to grant that there is no longer a Communion teaching on these matters. This is because “the doctrine of reception only makes sense if the proposals concern matters on which the Church has not so far made up its mind” and that does not describe the situation in relation to marriage within the Church of England. Charlie and others do not agree with that mind but that does not mean (whatever we think about the wider Communion) that the Church of England does not have a mind on it. The Cornes amendment in February 2023 at the start of the PLF process gave synodical support to the bishops' decision not to act in any way indicative of a departure from that doctrine. Given that “the doctrine of reception only makes sense if the proposals concern matters on which the Church has not so far made up its mind” reception cannot be applied “in the case of actions which are explicitly against the current teaching” of the Church of England. This means that, even if one were to put to one side the mind of the wider Communion and church catholic, the judgment remains that, to adapt para 69 quoted above, “No....diocese or parish (or deanery) has the right to introduce a novelty which goes against such teaching and excuse it on the grounds that it has simply been put forward for reception”. But this is exactly what the motion is attempting to do.

Second Problem: Women's Ordination is a flawed precedent

But what about the example of women's ordination? Isn't what is proposed simply applying to the current situation as regards marriage and sexuality what was done there?

Debates about reception in relation to women's ordination

It needs, first, to be recognised that appeals to “reception” in relation to this question have themselves generated a significant amount of debate. This really needs to be re-engaged with properly before any step is made to extend “reception” further to our current disagreements over sexuality. Important contributions here, representing a range of views, and in addition to the Communion documents already mentioned, would include

- [*The Virginia Report*](#) (1997) from the Inter-Anglican Theological and Doctrinal Commission particularly paras 5.21-5.26 on “[Discernment and Reception](#)”
- [*The Gift of Authority*](#) (1998) from ARCIC II with, for example, discussion of “Reception and Re-Reception: The Church's ‘Amen’ to the Word of God” (paras

24-25 which show how reception has been understood ecumenically and point to some of the challenges of extending this in the ways being proposed)

- Peter Toon's Latimer Study, *Reforming Forwards?: The process of reception and the consecration of women as bishops* (Latimer Studies 56/57, 2004)
- The collection of essays edited by Paul Avis entitled *Seeking the Truth of Change in the Church: Reception, Communion and The Ordination of Women* (Mowbray, 2004)
- Stephen Noll's paper ("[Women Bishops and Reception: An Occasion for Rehinking](#)") for the GAFCON Task Force on Women in the Episcopate *Interim Report* (2019) which is strongly critical of the appeal to reception in relation to women bishops.
- Various writings of Mary Tanner including a chapter in Avis' book, her article for Forward in Faith entitled "[Is Reception Really Open?](#)", and her submission to the Lambeth Commission that produced The Windsor Report on "[Decision-making process in the communion of the Church](#)"

Understanding reception

In relation to whether the Church of England's embracing of reception in relation to women's ordination is a valid precedent for the proposal in this Deanery Synod motion a key difference needs to be considered but again is not even noted by Charlie in his explanation.

As we saw in the passage from *The Windsor Report* above, it is usual to talk of a three-fold development when it comes to entering a period of reception in relation to a new development in Anglican teaching and/or practice: (i) theological debate and discussion, (ii) formal action, and (iii) increased consultation to see whether the formal action settles down and makes itself at home.

Currently in the Church of England on the matters of substance in the motion we are still at (i). In relation to (ii) the only formal action is the commendation of Prayers of Love and Faith for use in regular services. We could perhaps therefore legitimately say that this specific development can now be viewed as in a period of reception within the Church of England. It may be that, if these commended prayers prove to be well received (a matter on which at the very best the jury is still out given their impact on the Church of England and wider Anglican Communion), other formal actions may also be taken on that basis (much as the reception of women priests led, over time, to also opening the episcopate to women). But the motion wants to extend "open reception" much further than PLF in regular services. Rather alarmingly it is not precise as to what is to be classified as in this category speaking simply of "various practical measures of LGBTQIA inclusion". It is, however, clear that this extends, despite the church's clear existing doctrine, to both "civil marriage" and "marriage in church" for same-sex

couples, and same-sex married couples “being admitted to the priesthood and episcopate”.

This introduction of liturgical innovation and change of discipline in relation to ordained ministers under the guise of “open reception” without there being a clear proper canonical and synodical “formal action” on the basis of “theological debate and discussion” is to put the proverbial cart before the horse. It is also to ignore how we entered a period of reception in relation to women’s ordination.

Receiving women’s ordination

General Synod 1975

The language of “no fundamental objection” in the recent PMM before General Synod (which was effectively making the same point this motion now makes and ties to “reception”) was contentious in part because it echoed the motion passed by General Synod in 1975 that “this Synod considers that there are no fundamental objections to the ordination of women to the priesthood”. But simply passing that motion is not what moved the Church of England into a period of open reception in relation to women priests. Nor did decisions to ordain women as priests in other provinces move the Church of England into a period of open reception. That step only came 17 years later when, in November 1992, by significant two-thirds majorities in all 3 Houses, the Synod took “formal action” to open up the priesthood to women.

Bonds of Peace 1993

That this was the trigger for entering the sort of situation of “open reception” which this motion seeks to establish now in relation to disputed matters on marriage and sexuality is made clear in the June 1993 statement from the House of Bishops known as *Bonds of Peace*. This stated (para 3, italics added to highlight when the sort of claims now being made in relation to sexuality could be made and what is necessary to cross the threshold into a period of reception):

We now enter a process in which it is desirable that both those in favour and those opposed should be recognised as holding legitimate positions while the whole Church seeks to come to a common mind. The Church of England needs to understand itself as a communion in dialogue, committed to remaining together in the ongoing process of the discernment of truth within the wider fellowship of the Christian Church. Giving space to each other, and remaining in the highest degree of communion in spite of differences are crucial, as we strive to be open to the insights of the wider Christian community. Though some of the means by which communion is expressed may be strained or broken, the need for courtesy, tolerance, mutual respect, prayer for one another, and a continuing desire to know one another and to be with one another, remain binding on us as Christians, no less within our own Church than is already the case in our

ecumenical relations [this is very similar to the language in the motion's final clause, there sourced to Eames]. The danger to be avoided is that, where ecclesial communion is impaired, communities may begin to define themselves over against one another and develop in isolation from one another.

The Grindrod Report 1988

This process in the Church of England also fits with the wider pattern established in the Anglican Communion. This is set out in the 1988 Grindrod Report which Charlie cites in apparent support of his proposal to declare a period of open reception. It was clear that

- “Before a Province of the Anglican Communion proceeded to consecrate a woman as bishop it would *need to have satisfied itself that to admit women to all three orders of the historic ministry was not fundamentally to change the character of that ministry*” (para 54, italics added)
- “Should a Province, *after due consultation proceed to consecrate a woman as bishop* then that decision would still have to be tested in the universal Church. As with other developments of faith and order such a development would have to be affirmed by the people of God under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. A long range and far-reaching process of reception by the whole Church *would lie ahead*” (para 85, italics added).
- “Concerns for unity and truth are not separable in the faithful mission of the Church. A Province proceeding to consecrate a woman bishop *would need to be convinced that the practice of the Church in its locality demanded such action...*” (para 86, italics added).

The Church of England has done none of this as a province in relation to the developments concerning same-sex relationships and marriage which this motion wants to permit on the grounds of “open reception”.

In relation to Reception, noting that “we have constantly been struck by the importance of the theological concept of reception” the Grindrod Report set out two options. A Province “may wish to exercise restraint because of the possible disruptive effects upon the Communion” or alternatively they

may be persuaded by compelling doctrinal reasons, by their experience of women in ordained ministry and by the demands of the mission of the Church in their region to proceed to the ordination of a woman to the episcopate. This would only be done with overwhelming support in the diocese concerned. Such a step could only be taken within an over-riding acknowledgment of the need to offer such a development for reception, or indeed, rejection, by the whole Communion and by the universal Church and with care and support for the women so ordained (para 93, italics added).

The Five Guiding Principles

A similar ordering of steps is also pointed to within [The Five Guiding Principles](#). These make clear that “the Church of England has reached a clear decision on this matter” of women bishops even as it acknowledges that “its own clear decision on ministry and gender is set within a broader process of discernment within the Anglican Communion and the whole Church of God”. It is only “Now that legislation has been passed to enable women to become bishops” and “the Church of England is fully and unequivocally committed to all orders of ministry being open equally to all, without reference of gender” that it makes sense to say we are in a period of “open reception” on this matter. It would not have made sense to say this before that legislation was passed. It would not have made sense to say this simply on the basis of a range of views being present in the church. It would not have made sense to say this because Synod had agreed (as it has never done in relation to marriage and sexuality) that there are “no fundamental objections” to taking certain steps. It would not even have made sense to say this on the basis that a majority (and a much larger majority in Synod than there has ever been on the matters this motion refers to) clearly existed for this development.

Conclusion

In other words, a process of reception does not come about simply by noting a range of views being present and sincerely held in a particular part of the church. Nor does reception begin by simply stating that the existence of such a range of views means we must therefore be in “a period of active discernment” in which teaching and actions contrary to the received teaching and practice of that part of the church are now permitted. Entering a period of reception requires, on the basis of this evidence (including sources selectively cited in support of the motion) at the very least, a formal decision, by a church following its due processes, to act in new ways, based on compelling doctrinal reasons and with overwhelming support. None of that is true of the Church of England’s situation in relation to the matters this motion seeks to categorise as subject to “open reception”. In fact, it seems to be the case, that it is precisely *because* such conditions for genuine reception (as it has been understood and applied in relation to women priests and bishops) are lacking and seem unlikely to exist in the near future that this motion seeks instead to short-circuit that proper pathway and trigger, in a totally novel manner, a time of reception.

Third Problem: Who decides the significance of a new development and whether and how it might be recognised?

There are not just these two problems with arguing we are now in a time of “open reception” and need to recognise this for the purpose of “maintaining the overall unity of the Church of England, including the unity of each diocese under the jurisdiction of the diocesan bishop”. A third and final key problem with the proposal is its failure to engage

with the crucial question as to how theologically significant the developments being proposed for “open reception” are and who should determine this matter. Instead it simply assumes and implicitly asserts one answer.

Clarifying the Question

People like me, whom the motion describes as “those who dissent from...various practical measures of LGBTQIA inclusion” are simply upholding the teaching and practice of the Church of England and the wider church catholic down through the centuries and across the world. It would therefore be very difficult to argue that we (with our “dissent”, an odd term to use for those who continue to receive the tradition) are not in fact “loyal Anglicans and followers of the Lord Jesus Christ in this shared tradition”. Having said that, one reason why, *practically* not simply theologically, many conservatives are highly suspicious of the language of “open reception” is due to some responses to those who continue to uphold the traditional practice in relation to women’s ordination and to those who uphold traditional teaching and practice on marriage in churches which have rejected it.

The question therefore that needs to be addressed but is ignored here is whether, and on what basis, those who “assent” to the proposed changes should be recognised as, *in this specific area*, recognisably “loyal Anglicans and followers of the Lord Jesus Christ in this shared tradition”. One assumes that those who do so assent believe that their own position is indeed loyal to the tradition. The really crucial question therefore is whether those who *do not personally assent* to the developments but “dissent” (because their assent remains with the church’s received teaching and practice) can nevertheless recognise the legitimacy in some sense of the novel position and the need for it to have a recognised place in the life of the church. This is, in effect, to judge the proposed changes as *adiaphora*, matters of indifference.

The Faith and Order Commission’s Analysis (2016 and 2025)

As the Church of England’s Faith and Order Commission has made very clear these are complex matters. It discussed them in the 2016 Communion and Disagreement report ([GS Misc 1139](#)) which was helpfully summarised in [the LLF book](#) and [course](#). It has returned to them even more fully as recently as the January 2025 FAOC report ([GS Misc 1406](#)).

The FAOC analysis proposes not simply the two-fold division often referred to as “first order” and “second order” issues but rather a three-fold distinction. It notes that the challenge is we not only disagree with each other about the presenting issues but also about how seriously we view these disagreements. Some, it argues (for example [paras 116ff of GS Misc 1406](#)) see them as first-order, threatening what FAOC calls “apostolic communion”. Others see them as second-order, threatening “ecclesial communion”. Yet others see them as third-order and so a difference “which strains elements of

communion but which can be addressed *within* a single ecclesial structure”. This last judgment is clearly what the motion is assuming – it is an attempt to say that, in the terms of this framework, “various practical measures of LGBTQIA inclusion — such as the blessing of same-sex couples, civil marriage, and marriage in church of same-sex couples, and their being admitted to the priesthood and episcopate as full and equal members” are neither first-order or second-order. It does not make clear that is what it is saying and so it does not defend such a view but it seems very difficult to read it as saying anything other than this. Anyone who believes these matters are first-order or second-order will therefore find it very difficult, likely impossible, to support the motion.

But there is a more serious problem than this not being acknowledged at all. The heart of it is set out in [para 139 of the 2025 FAOC report](#) which, in discussing how we go about evaluating what kind of disagreement we are in fact facing, states (*italics added*):

It is a failure of Christian love for one side to declare what kind of disagreement is being experienced by the other. It must surely be the case that those who disagree with a given decision are themselves determinative of what kind of disagreement is in view, not the content majority. Those who dissent from the majority view or decision get to define the nature of their disagreement: if it is widely held that such-and-such a belief or practice calls into question apostolic communion or ecclesial communion, then the disagreement simply is a first- or second-order disagreement, regardless of whether the majority think it merely strains communion (third order).

The report notes the importance of the phrase “*widely held*” in that assessment but, with that proviso, then states the following in relation to LLF (which clearly therefore applies by extension to the even more substantial developments with which the motion is concerned):

To deny that LLF is a first- or second-order disagreement simply on the basis that the majority assert that it is not (in spite of what the dissenting minority say) is unkind or even oppressive. Whether the PLF and related arrangements comprise something that Christians cannot agree to disagree on, as moved in an amendment to the substantive LLF motion in the February 2024 Synod, is a curious thing to decide by a vote. That 46% of Synod members voted in favour of that amendment demonstrates that it is the case, even though the amendment fell in all three houses! What kind of disagreement we are having cannot be discerned or determined by a vote. If there is to be any meaningful ongoing dialogue about what to do in the face of profound disagreement, it must proceed from the basis of acknowledging and accepting that, for a large proportion of those who disagree, the disagreement is of first- or second-order significance.

Here we have clearly stated, by FAOC, the deeper problem with this motion that is even more serious than its selective and flawed appeal to past documents about reception. It is seeking to address the kind of disagreement we are having in a way which is not fitted for that purpose. That is because this is a matter which “cannot be discerned or determined by a vote”. As such it represents a proposed way forward which is not one of “meaningful ongoing dialogue about what to do in the face of profound disagreement”. It is in fact a proposed way forward which risks instead being “unkind or even oppressive” and “a failure of Christian love”.

Conclusion

Charlie’s statement in support of his re-election to General Synod concludes by addressing “living together in communion”. His passionate commitment to securing the developments which his Deanery Synod motion seeks to introduce by means of appeal to “open reception” is evident but he also is clear that “I have no wish to exclude people”. This is then tied to the concern with which his motion and this article opened: “I am also acutely aware of the damage that ‘structural provision’ can do the unity of Christ’s church”. On that basis he draws to a close with these words

I am therefore committed to working in good faith with others from different theological perspectives to find a way to a unified church in which different theological perspectives are held with integrity. This is a Gospel imperative, and our mission and evangelism rely on our finding a way to preach a Gospel that can be heard, and to be a church that people can believe in.

His motion similarly ends with a clause that one hopes would be able to receive widespread support in its description of our current situation and how in the face of this we need to engage with one another:

although some of the means by which communion is expressed may be strained...there is a need for courtesy, tolerance, mutual respect, and prayer for one another, and we confirm that our desire to know or be with one another, remains binding on us as Christians (Eames, p.119).

The challenges we face are however very large, including that

- i. it seems unlikely there will any time soon be sufficient majorities for the Church of England to take “formal action”, by due processes, to introduce the wide range of changes he and many others want
- ii. if that is indeed the case then, if the argument above holds, appeal cannot legitimately be made to “open reception” as a means of nevertheless introducing them into the Church of England because this requires such formal action based on compelling doctrinal reasons and with overwhelming support

- iii. to determine the significance of such proposed changes is, by its very nature, a question which “cannot be discerned or determined by a vote” as “if it is widely held that such-and-such a belief or practice calls into question apostolic communion or ecclesial communion, then the disagreement simply is a first- or second-order disagreement, regardless of whether the majority think it merely strains communion (third order)”
- iv. it is clear that a very significant body within the Church of England (and even more the overwhelming majority of the Anglican Communion and Christ’s church as a whole whose unity is what we all ultimately seek) do see these matters as ones of at least ecclesial communion and indeed for many they are ones of apostolic communion
- v. an approach therefore of “working in good faith with others from different theological perspectives” will need to respect theological perspectives on the significance of our disagreements and recognise that it cannot “declare what kind of disagreement is being experienced by the other” without being “a failure of Christian love” and “even oppressive”
- vi. given this and the fact that the unity of Christ’s church in terms of ecclesial order cannot be separated from shared faith (hence the challenge of ecumenical conversations), there is a serious question as to the degree to which we can achieve “a unified church in which different theological perspectives are held with integrity” without “structural provision” of some, perhaps quite significant, form that recognises how seriously divergent our “different theological perspectives” are.