

Questions Under SO71 – Diocesan Synod March 2026

From the Revd Nick Gowers:

Question:

In light of the most recent update from General Synod regarding LLF, and some of the questions under Standing Order 71 at the last Diocesan Synod, please could +Hugh share his convictions regarding the place of the PLF in the Diocese and how he hopes to engage with the diversity of convictions within the Diocese.

Senior clergy in the Diocese have mostly professed and endorsed more progressive theological positions. What support might be offered to those who by theological conviction seek to uphold the C of E's present doctrine of marriage including those among them who might identify as LGBTQI+ or "same-sex attracted" and are grateful for organisations such as [Living Out](#) or the [The True Freedom Trust](#).

Answer from Bishop Hugh:

Following the very wide consultation that led to the recent Statement of Needs, the Vacancy in See Committee included the following carefully and deliberately worded statement:

"We need a bishop therefore who:

- will be affirming of people who are LGBTQI+, honour and implement decisions made in General Synod, and who will wholeheartedly value, embrace, support and work with those whose convictions are different, committed to ensuring all are protected to flourish.
- will be an example of how to live generously with 'unity in diversity', who is known for relational collegiality and collaborative engagement across traditions, and who will set a culture in which the outcomes of Living in Love and Faith can be taken forward with love and respect for all."

In keeping with that statement and the [PLF Pastoral Guidance](#), Bishop Hugh and Bishop Martin are committed to supporting and, if necessary, defending clergy who decide to use the PLF and to supporting and, if necessary, defending clergy who decide not to use the PLF. We are both committed to 'valuing, embracing, supporting and working with' people with a full range of theological views and convictions, including LGBTQI+ people who seek further change and those who do not.

We know that holding together the very deep differences that exist in the church is demanding, and that the last years have been painful and divisive for many. We continue to hold on to a vision of a generous church that has space for all who love the Lord, try to follow his way and seek the welfare of the communities we serve.

From the Revd Ben Somervell

Question:

In response to Fr Adam Hadley's question at the last meeting, Bishop Martin said the following:

"The Prayers of Love and Faith remain commended by the House of Bishops for use but, following extensive legal advice and theological work by the Faith and Order Commission, it was felt by the bishops that standalone services and permission for clergy to be in same sex civil marriages needed additional synodical approval".

I therefore have a question, arising from this response:

Bishop Martin, please could you clarify the legal basis on which standalone PLF services are considered to require the Canon B2 process, while the same liturgy, prayers, and blessings, when used within another service, are not? Given that the words and theology are identical in both contexts, how is this distinction understood to be legally coherent and consistent within the framework of the Church of England?

Answer from Bishop Hugh

The full legal advice which formed the basis of this decision is available at <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2025-11/gsmisc-1432-living-in-love-and-faith-legal-advice-september-2025.pdf>.

In brief, it suggests that, were the Prayers of Love and Faith to be permitted in a 'bespoke' service through a House of Bishops commendation, clergy using these prayers would be open to proceedings under the Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction Measure 1963. Although commendation of prayers by the House of Bishops has been used in recent decades, such decisions give no canonical or legal authority to services commended in this way. That has not been controversial as these decisions have been made unanimously within the House of Bishops about liturgies that are not contentious (often additional prayers for use as part of the Common Worship suite). As a result the legal basis of such commendations has never been tested. It is extremely likely that there would be a legal challenge against a priest who uses the PLF in a bespoke service, and the legal advice is that, given the PLF were only approved by a majority of bishops which was far from unanimous, such a test may conclude that a bespoke service of PLF cannot clearly be said to be "neither contrary to, nor indicative of any departure from, the doctrine of the Church of England in any essential matter". In such a situation it would be the minister with the cure of souls who would be accused.

The only way to conclude that a standalone service of the PLF is "neither contrary to, nor indicative of any departure from, the doctrine of the Church of England in any essential matter" is for General Synod to affirm it through authorisation under Canon B2.

This is, of course, merely 'advice' and as such should not be seen as conclusive. It was however read by the House of Bishops alongside the theological advice from the Faith and Order Commission (FAOC) which can be read at <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2025-11/gsmisc-1430-the-doctrine-of-marriage-and-the-prayers-of-love-and-faith-texts-and-contexts.pdf>

This document, which is lengthy and theologically dense, suggests that the liturgical context in which prayers are spoken communicate as much as the words themselves. It therefore raises the concern that the Prayers of Love and Faith, when used in a bespoke service, may communicate, or be understood by some to be communicating, an equivalence to marriage, thus challenging the view that the PLF are "neither contrary to, nor indicative of any departure from, the doctrine of the Church of England in any essential matter".

Again, the FAOC report does not insist on any particular view, and deliberately avoids drawing decisive conclusions about the PLF. However, the combination of the concerns raised in the legal advice and the FAOC report, together with the serious threat to Anglican ecclesiology that many Bishops saw in the plans for alternative episcopal oversight, led the House of Bishops to a widely (in fact almost unanimous) shared view that a decision about the use of PLF in bespoke services could only decisively be made by General Synod through authorisation under Canon B2.

From Robin LaFontaine:

Question:

At the Diocesan Synod meeting on 4 November 2024, we passed the following motion regarding Project Spire (Reparations):

"This Synod urges the Church Commissioners to promote informed public and media understanding of their role, and to work towards timely and pro-active engagement with parishes through their Dioceses when considering the allocation of funds not prima facie related to the Commissioners' responsibilities for the mission and ministry of the Church of England or which may adversely affect stewardship in its parishes."

Bishop Martin undertook that he or the Diocesan Secretary would write to the Chair of the Church Commissioners to ensure the point is made clearly. We have heard nothing since then.

My question is:

- 1. Was a letter written to the Church Commissioners and if so please could we see a copy of this?*
- 2. Was there a reply from the Church Commissioners and if so please could we see a copy of this?*
- 4. Is there any evidence of any action taken by the Church Commissioners as a result of our motion?*
- 5. If there was no reply and/or action, and in the light of growing concern among parishioners - focused on the accuracy of the project's historical basis, the adequacy of consultation, and the project being beyond the Commissioners' legal powers - would our new Bishop undertake to raise this issue again and ask for a response?*

Answer from Diocesan Secretary, Andy Todd and Bishop Hugh

Andy Todd:

This answer has two parts: a response to questions 1 and 2 from the Diocesan Secretary, and a response to questions 3 and 4 from Bishop Hugh.

Shortly after the November 2024 Synod, Bishop Martin and I had secured a meeting with William Nye, the Secretary General to the Archbishops' Council and Secretary-General to the General Synod of the Church of England. We had requested the meeting in order to present the views of Bishop's Council on the motion being brought to General Synod regarding a possible new financial settlement for the Church of England (what has become known as the 'Hereford Motion'), and to communicate the financial stress and missional challenges being faced by the Diocese. Wadham Downing, Chair of the Worcester Diocesan Board of Finance, and David White, Deputy Director of Finance for the National Church Institutions, were also present at the meeting, which took place on 9th December 2024 at the Diocesan Office in Lowesmoor. We had hoped that Alan Smith, First Estates Commissioner, would also be present at the meeting, but he unfortunately declined.

This seemed to be an excellent opportunity to achieve maximum impact by including the Malvern and Upton Deanery motion in the discussion, in person rather than by correspondence. During the meeting I therefore read the motion to William, and passed him a copy of DS 24(14), the full text of the motion and introduction.

Bishop Martin and I noted that we had evidence of a number of individuals stopping their giving to their parish church as a result. We emphasised that the issue was not about the evils of chattel slavery, but that better communication and potentially consultation is needed.

William noted that he was very aware of the strength of feeling generated by the Commissioners' commitments, and committed to ensuring that our motion would be communicated to the Commissioners alongside other representations which had been received.

Although it is hard to quantify, my perception has been that the level of engagement from the Commissioners in working with Dioceses to explain their priorities has increased significantly over the past 2 years, not least because of the experience of the Hereford motion and following the response to their work in relation to Chattel Slavery. The feedback via the various National Church forums of which I am part has been that there is a genuine desire to communicate well.

Bishop Hugh:

We have no authority over the Church Commissioners and cannot answer on their behalf. However, they have repeatedly given public assurances that the Fund for Healing and Justice does fall within their Charitable Objects. They are a serious organisation, with proper, high quality governance arrangements and legal advice, and I therefore have confidence in these assurances.

On the Fund itself, the Commissioners have undertaken serious and in depth historical research which has shown that there are direct connections between profits made by the slave trade and the Queen Anne's bounty, which is core to the funds that they oversee. I believe that it is appropriate for the Commissioners to invest a small fraction (less than 1%) of the value of that fund in a better future for the communities that were, and continue to be, directly affected by the evil of the transatlantic slave trade.

The fund is not providing 'reparations' - in the sense of providing direct funding to individuals- but will invest in projects and initiatives that are focussed on healing and justice in communities in the West Indies who continue to carry the harms caused by the slave trade. It seems to me entirely in keeping with the gospel of healing and justice, the purpose of the Church of England and the witness of Jesus Christ that this investment in a fairer future be made.

I celebrate the leading role that the Church of England made in ending the slave trade, and I am pleased the legacy of this work will continue. I also celebrate the way in which this legacy continues in the work done by Christians, including through the Clewer Initiative to counter the evil of modern slavery. Slavery of all kinds was, is and always will be an outrage to God and His people.

The Commissioners have also been consistently clear that their investment in this work will not diminish their core purpose of supporting the mission and ministry of the church - indeed, at the same time as they have allocated this money to the Fund for Healing and Justice, they have also provided a record amount to dioceses and parishes.