

## **Human Sexuality in the context of Christian Belief**

Motion in the name of M Jackson and H Miller

Members of General Synod, we have been meeting for three days and to many of you I suggest that at this stage it may feel like a week! However, it is still only Saturday.

I greatly appreciate, as does the bishop Down and Dromore, your willingness to engage with the topic: **Human Sexuality in the context of Christian Belief** today, after you have all given such concentrated attention to Synod's business over the last two days. This subject today returns to our deliberations in the form of one Motion. Members will notice that the bishops have sought to listen to and to incorporate concerns which were voiced on the First Day of General Synod. The Preamble has been removed, save for the five words: ***The General Synod affirms that:*** For my own part, I apologize wholeheartedly to any Members who feel that this Motion, in its original form, was 'bounced' on them, by virtue of its arriving at your home only days before the start of Synod. Simply stated, this just was how, in a pressured world, the time-frame turned out. No insult or hurt was intended.

I should like briefly to address two other matters at this early stage, if I may. The term: *normative* is used theologically to give voice to God's perfect loving will for, in and through the creation; Members of Synod might well wish to understand it as an alternative way of speaking of God's Kingdom. This is what we are called, as followers of Jesus Christ, always to proclaim, to seek and to work for. Normative is not used in any such way as to make anyone: *abnormal*, in the context of human sexuality or of anything else. I am as squeamish as is any of you about using the two words: *sexual intercourse* particularly in addressing the General Synod. It is a term which has a legally defined meaning, and it complements and sheds light on the term: chastity which is to be found in the Catechism. That is why it has to be used here, reticent though anyone might be about

it. I am also aware of the infelicity in the final paragraph. It should read: The General Synod requests ... and I trust that Synod will allow me to proceed on the basis of such an intended and effectual reading. I would also like to add, with human and pastoral sensitivity and reticence, that we appreciate that this matter is a complex and sensitive one for many individuals and couples. The particular emphasis on procreation is one that gives rise to very real and private pain for those who find that they cannot have children or who experience significant challenges in that regard.

Significant and frequent mention has been made of the Residential Conference for Synod Members which was held in the Slieve Russell Hotel, Ballyconnell, County Cavan in the diocese of Kilmore in mid-March. It followed from a Pastoral Letter which we, the bishops, issued earlier. This gathering by all accounts provided an opportunity for Members of the General Synod to explore aspects of a topic which is highly emotive within the life of society in general. For many, this has become the defining issue of international Anglicanism. The flow and content of the Cavan Conference provided many opportunities for attentive listening as well as clear speaking. Its residential capacity facilitated the turning of acquaintance into friendship. It was structured to facilitate the expression of principled positions faithfully held, in a climate of critical trust and mutual respect. All of this, from the overwhelmingly positive and grateful reactions subsequent to the Conference, has underwritten the realization that the Church of Ireland wishes to hold together in the area of: **Human Sexuality in the context of Christian Belief.** Furthermore, there is a clear desire for the dialogue to continue with further use of the kind of style, format and approach which we experienced in Cavan.

Episcopacy is defined by service every bit as much as it is by leadership. The two stand together. This is manifestly true in a synodical church where together the bishops seek to model the intentional discipleship which is the calling of all God's children and of the followers of Jesus Christ. It is in this spirit that we bring to General Synod a Motion in direct response to and continuity with the energy of the Conference. We are as concerned

as are all other members of Synod to sustain and to deepen this energy for cohesion, honouring all traditions within the Church of Ireland. In the *first* part, this is expressed through what we say in our Formularies, Canons and liturgy in the Book of Common Prayer. In the *second* part, it is a voicing of the personal and pastoral responsibilities and opportunities to model charity which we all carry together. In the *third* part, it is the request for permission to be given by General Synod to itself to develop further initiatives for intentional encounter across the Church of Ireland. These initiatives need to be progressed through the Standing Committee on behalf of the Synod as a matter of some urgency. We have taken the liberty to apprise Standing Committee at its April Meeting of the shape and content of this. The discussion engaged the participation of all shades of opinion on these issues and it was one of the best discussions which I have witnessed in Standing Committee throughout my time of membership. Having listened to Standing Committee, and now having again listened to the General Synod on Day One, we now offer this Motion under Standing Order 31 (d) to you, in order to keep open such access to the tent of meeting for the whole church.

As bishops of the Church of Ireland we have the firm and fervent desire of enabling members of our church to engage with what are some of the most complex, pressing and, to many, private aspects of contemporary life, understood from a sexual perspective. It is my hope, and that of the bishop of Down and Dromore, that we are, in fact, offering something of value to the Church of Ireland. It is also our hope that, through the Church of Ireland, we are offering this also to others beyond ourselves for whom such issues have that same element of pressing complexity. We have the further hope that General Synod will find it possible, in its heart, to accept and pass this Motion as the next stage of engagement with one another around these issues. It is our shared conviction that such dialogue and discussion can be informed, principled, compassionate and, most of all, life-giving, both inside and outside the church.

